

No 26

5 cents.

FAME AND FORTUNE STORIES OF BOYS WEEKLY. WHO MAKE MONEY.

THE WAY TO SUCCESS; OR, THE BOY WHO GOT THERE.

By A SELF-MADE MAN.



The flames were already reaching for them. He tied the rope securely around his waist, stepped out on the sill, and measured with his eye the distance he proposed to jump. Then, nerving himself for the effort, he leaped upward.

Fame and Fortune Weekly

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY

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The Way to Success;

OR,

THE BOY WHO GOT THERE.

By A SELF-MADE MAN.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCES JACK FROST AND THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH HE LIVES.

"SUPPER is ready, Jack," said a pleasant-faced little woman of perhaps five-and-thirty years, standing in the kitchen doorway of a small, neat-looking farmhouse, to a strong, good-looking boy who had just driven a light wagon into the yard.

"All right, auntie," replied the boy, in the cheery tone habitual with him, "I'll be ready just as soon as I put the horse in the stable."

The lad continued on to the barn, unharnessed the animal, and led her to her stall.

"You look a bit heated, old girl," he said, patting her affectionately on her sleek neck. "I guess I won't feed you until after I've had my supper."

Then he went to the wagon, took out an armful of packages, crossed the yard and entered the house.

Jack Frost was an orphan and just sixteen years of age.

Born and educated in the East, the sudden and tragic death of both his parents in a steamboat disaster on Long Island Sound threw him, on the eve of his fifteenth birthday, practically penniless upon his own resources.

In this strait he gladly accepted an invitation from his mother's only sister, Lucy, who, years before, married an enterprising man named Frank Harper, and moved out West, to come to Wisconsin and make their farm his home. He had been there but a couple of months, and was fast learning to make himself useful, when Mr. Harper caught a severe cold, which developed into pneumonia and carried him to his grave.

In this emergency Jack came to the front, and proved himself a bulwark of strength and consolation to his bereaved aunt.

With a degree of confidence unusual in one so young he took the management of the farm entirely upon his young shoulders, hired a competent and trustworthy assistant, and, much to the surprise of the neighboring agriculturists, carried the work on in as good shape as it had ever been conducted by Mr. Harper.

The property was located on a shallow stream, one of the tributaries of the Chippewa River, in the western part of Wisconsin, and the chief product of the farm, some two thousand bushels of wheat, had just been harvested.

Mrs. Harper largely depended on this crop to pay off a two thousand dollar mortgage owing to one Nathan Plunkett, the postmaster and a prosperous storekeeper of Eden, the nearest town, which was situated five miles distant, at

the junction of the Chippewa River and the stream which flowed by the farm.

"I had a visitor this afternoon, Jack," said his aunt, after the hired man had left the table to attend to his chores around the barn.

"Who was it, auntie?" he asked, curiously.

"Nathan Plunkett."

A cloud gathered on the boy's brow, for he didn't like Mr. Plunkett for a cent, nor, we may say, did the Eden storekeeper regard Jack Frost with a friendly eye.

Mr. Plunkett was a widower of about fifty, and had a son named Felix, who in many ways was very like his father.

For some reason not quite clear to Jack Frost the postmaster's son entertained a strong dislike for him, and never failed to show it when the two boys met.

Nathan Plunkett himself was not, on the whole, a popular man.

That fact, however, did not seem to worry him greatly.

He was the political mogul of Eden, and well enough in this world's goods to apparently disregard private prejudices.

"What did he want?" asked Jack, a bit brusquely, when Mrs. Harper named her visitor.

"He wanted to know if we had finished harvesting our wheat."

"Oh, he did?"

"Yes. I told him we had it all housed in our big barn."

"He seems to be very much interested in our affairs," replied the boy, sarcastically.

"He wished to know if we intended to ship it soon."

"What for?" said Jack, in some surprise.

"He wants to buy it."

"Wants to buy it?"

"He offered me seventy-five cents a bushel for it as it stands, cash."

"Why, auntie, wheat is selling for a dollar, and is expected to go still higher."

"But it must be delivered at Chicago, St. Louis or some other grain center to realize that. When you come to figure on the expense of getting it down to Eden, the nearest point on the railroad, and then add freight rates and commission charges, it will make quite a hole in the difference."

"I admit all that, auntie, but Mr. Plunkett wouldn't make you an offer if he didn't see his way clear to making a good profit on the transaction."

"I dare say that is true, Jack."

"Either he has found out in some way that wheat has just gone up a point or two, or is about to do so, or else there is something else in the background."

"What could be in the background?"

"I am sure I couldn't tell you, auntie, as I'm not a mind-reader. You ought to know Mr. Plunkett better than I."

"I wish I didn't know him quite as well as I do."

"He comes around here often enough. Of course, it's none of my business. He doesn't come to see me."

"He comes to see me, I regret to say," replied Mrs. Harper, with a troubled look.

"I don't see why the fact that he holds a mortgage on this place for two thousand dollars makes it necessary that he should be so much in evidence. The farm isn't going to run away."

"It isn't the mortgage that brings him here. That is amply secured by this property. The farm was appraised at four thousand dollars when Frank borrowed the money of him three years ago. It is easily worth five thousand dollars to-day."

"All of that, auntie," replied Jack, nodding his head positively. "I heard Mr. Greene, who owns the place adjoining on the east, you know, say so, and he has a pretty clear idea of the value of property in this neighborhood."

"I can well believe that," Mrs. Harper answered. "Now, Jack, there is no reason why I should keep anything from you. You have been a son and a protector to me ever since Frank died." Her voice broke in a sob and her handsome eyes filled with tears. "I don't really know what I should have done without you."

"I have done the best I could for you, Aunt Lucy," the boy said earnestly, rising, putting his arms protectingly about her, and kissing her gently on the cheek.

"You have done nobly, dear," she replied, drawing his head down and imprinting a kiss on his forehead. "How shall I ever thank you enough?"

"I don't want you to thank me, auntie. I am only doing my duty by you. You may depend that I will continue to do that as long as I remain with you."

"I hope that will be a long time, Jack," she said, with a caress.

"I hope so, too, auntie."

"As I was going to say, I have no wish to have any secrets from you, so I want to explain the real cause of Mr. Plunkett's visits. He wants to marry me."

"Marry—you!" gasped the boy, starting back in the greatest amazement.

"Yes, Jack. He had the assurance last week to ask me to be his wife."

"Great Caesar! And what did you say to him?"

"I was dumbfounded."

"I should think you would be."

"I told him, in great indignation, that he ought to be ashamed to make such a proposal to me when he knew my dear husband had not been a year in his grave."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He said he did not expect that I would marry him at once. What he wanted was my promise that I would marry him after a time."

"Well, auntie?"

"I said I had no intention of ever marrying again."

"Of course you did."

"He said that was a very foolish decision. That I could not expect to carry on this farm successfully as matters stood."

"Ho!" exclaimed Jack. "You might have told him that the farm was thriving without any outside assistance."

"I did. I told him you were conducting the place to my entire satisfaction."

"What did he say to that?"

"He said that my assertion was ridiculous. That you were a mere boy, without agricultural experience. That you were bound to run the farm into the ground, involve me in financial embarrassments, and in the end cause me to lose the property."

"Very kind of him," laughed the boy. "I guess, on the contrary, I've harvested a crop of wheat that will relieve you of the embarrassment of owing Mr. Plunkett the sum of two thousand dollars."

"I told him so very plainly."

"I'll bet he didn't like it."

"He certainly did not, for he laughed in an unpleasant way and remarked that there was many a slip between the cup and the lip."

"What did he mean by that?" asked the boy, quickly.

"I am sure I don't know, Jack."

"Nothing good, I'll bet," replied the young farmer soberly and thoughtfully.

"He couldn't have meant me any harm, or he wouldn't have come around to-day and offered to buy the wheat from me. Even at seventy-five cents a bushel that would amount to enough to clear off the mortgage when it comes due a month from now."

"It certainly would, and leave something over. But I hope you won't accept his offer."

"I told him I had to consult you before I could give him an answer."

"I'll wager he didn't like that, either," chuckled Jack.

"I knew he didn't from the expression of his face," said Mrs. Harper. "He smiled unpleasantly—I didn't like his smile, Jack, for there seemed to be something menacing behind it—and replied that I could send him word. Then he took his leave, but I saw him talking to John in the yard, and afterward they both went to the big barn."

"Wanted to see how much wheat we really had, eh?"

"I presume so."

"I have no doubt that he is fully satisfied we have enough to loosen his grip on the farm. Do you know, auntie, it has been my opinion from the start that he figured on getting possession of this place through foreclosure proceedings. That is, ever since Uncle Frank died. He did not believe you would be able to run the farm successfully this year, especially as luck was against Uncle Frank the last two years or more. Besides, no one expected wheat would fetch more than fifty cents a bushel, or sixty at the most, which has been about the figure for the past five years. But Jordan, the great Chicago Board of Trade operator, is working to corner the product, and that has sent the price of grain soaring. It is hardly likely that he will succeed, though they say the people supporting him are worth millions. Were he successful it would mean from \$1.50 to \$2 wheat, something unprecedented for the farmer, but rather hard on the consumer—the poor, particularly."

"Yes. Frank never dreamed of getting a dollar for this year's wheat," said Mrs. Harper, mournfully. "He counted on paying about one-half of the mortgage and getting a renewal for another year. He believed there would be no

difficulty in making such arrangements, as the security had increased twenty per cent. in value."

"Well, I have very little confidence in Mr. Plunkett. I wouldn't trust him any further than I could see him. I am fully satisfied that he has been counting on becoming the owner of this farm at a bargain. He is known as a hard man to deal with when the advantage is on his side. That's his record in Eden. I hadn't been a month in the county before I heard enough about him to fill a book."

"I hope he won't come here again until the mortgage is due and he comes for his money," said Mrs. Harper.

"You don't hope it any more than I do, for he looks decidedly out of place in this neighborhood, and his room is better than his company. Besides, I don't want you to be annoyed by his unwelcome attentions."

"I certainly told him in unmistakable language that there wasn't the least chance that I should reconsider my stand in respect to his proposal of marriage."

"I am glad you made that plain to him, auntie. He had an awful nerve to think you would accept the attentions of any man so soon after Uncle Frank's death."

"But what about selling the wheat, Jack? You know, I shall need the money in a month to settle the mortgage."

"If you will confide the matter to my judgment, auntie, I think you will find that you will come out all right. I have a plan for shipping it to St. Louis by water which, if I can carry it out successfully, will save you all freight charges and bring you in a net result of at least one dollar a bushel."

"Why, Jack, you astonish me! What is this plan?"

"I'd rather say nothing about it just now," said the boy, with a smile.

And with that the little woman had to be content.

CHAPTER II.

A CRUISE IN THE SWAMP.

On the following morning at half-past five Jack Frost and his particular friend, Joe Beaseley, who worked for Farmer Greene, met by appointment at the end of the lane between the two farms where it faced upon the creek.

It was the first day of September, and the sun was just rising above the distant landscape into a perfectly clear sky.

"Well, Jack, where are we bound for?" asked Beaseley, curiously.

"We're bound for the swamp, was the prompt reply.

Half a mile from where the boys stood was a narrow and deep stream which flowed into the creek.

It formed the boundary of the Harper property on the west.

This branch ran through a small but dense swamp.

In the early spring its surface was overflowed with water.

It was covered with a thick growth of trees, and the place was dark and dismal.

Hardly any one ever visited the swamp except Jack Frost.

He was rather fond of exploring out-of-the-way places, and this deep and dark morass had early attracted his attention.

Just before his uncle died he had made a small raft and threaded its gloomy recesses, and the two boys, when they reached the edge of the swamp that morning, found the raft floating in the very spot Jack had left it months before, with its long pole lying undisturbed among the bushes.

"I'll bet there hasn't been any one here since you tied that raft to that stump," said Joe, in a positive tone.

"Doesn't look as if there had been, that's a fact."

"How long ago was that?"

"Last spring."

"You say we're going right through the swamp, eh?"

"That's what we are."

"Will this blamed old raft hold together, do you think?"

"Sure. Why not? Can't you see that I put it together to last? I didn't propose to have it come apart up in that morass and dump me out where I couldn't extricate myself, and nobody would hear my shouts for assistance. Not much, Joe Beaseley," and Jack wagged his head sagaciously.

"What sort of an exploring expedition are we going on?" asked Beaseley, when they had pushed off from the shore, Jack manipulating the pole in a skilful manner.

"None whatever," replied Frost.

"Well, what's in the wind, anyway?" persisted Joe, consumed by curiosity as to the object of the watery jaunt.

"Business," replied Jack, laconically.

"Business?" ejaculated Beaseley, in astonishment.

Just so."

"What kind of business?"

"I told you I was thinking of building a kind of house-boat to float our wheat down the creek to the Chippewa, down the Chippewa to the Mississippi, and down the Mississippi to St. Louis, didn't I?"

"Sure you did. It's the finest scheme I ever heard of. It will be a jim-dandy trip, and you promised to take me along with you if I'd help you build the boat and assist in navigating it afterward."

"You've got it all right," grinned Jack, working the raft so as to avoid a sunken log whose nose was just on the level with the water.

"You can just bet I'll help you build the old Noah's Ark, and I'm ready to do my share toward seeing that it reaches St. Louis, too. I wouldn't miss it if Mr. Greene was to promise me a whole acre of his farm for myself if I'd agree to stay back here and let somebody else take my place. No, sir; not for Joe."

"I thought I could depend on you, Joe."

"You bet your boots you can. But what has that to do with this here trip up into the swamp?"

"Everything."

"How so?"

"We're making this trip to procure the material with which to build the boat," replied Jack.

"Are you going to cut down some of these trees? I see you brought an axe and a coil of rope with you."

"Cut down nothing," answered Frost. "I expect to find the stuff I want already prepared for us to use."

"You don't say!" replied Joe, in some surprise.

"I do say so, and you'll say so, too, when I show you what we've come after."

"You saw the stuff when you were here before?"

"I did. How else should I know it is to be got?"

"That's right," admitted Beaseley. "If it's all ready to cut down, it will save us a powerful lot of labor."

"I wish we could build a boat big enough to take Mr. Greene's grain, too. We could make quite a little sum out of the freight. But that's out of the question."

"I reckon it is. Do you know how much wheat Mr. Greene has got in his barns altogether?"

"Five or six thousand bushels."

"Seven thousand scant."

"That's a lot," said Jack. "I wish we had as much."

"Your farm is less than half the size of ours," replied Joe.

"I know it. We've done as well as could be expected, I'm sure."

"Mr. Greene says you're a wonder, Jack. He can't get it through his head that you never were on a farm before you came out here."

"Well, I never was."

"I don't see, either, how you could take hold of your aunt's place and make things pan out the way you have. I've been on a farm ever since I was knee high to a grasshopper, and blame me if I have the nerve to attempt to run a place like you do."

"You forget I have John Gray, who is an experienced man, at my back. I depend a lot on his advice."

"That's all right. He's a good worker and understands his business from A to Z, but just the same he hasn't got the head to run a farm successfully. If he had he wouldn't be working for you to-day. He's failed as an independent farmer and lost all his money at it."

"It seems to come natural to me to do the right thing and make the most out of my opportunities just as soon as I see my way clear. When I figured up the trouble and expense of carting our wheat to Eden, loading it on the cars there, paying freight to Chicago and other necessary expenses, I began to consider, since we have a continuous waterway from the farm right to the St. Louis elevators, if I couldn't manage to float the grain down there on a boat that I could build myself with your help."

"And you decided you could?"

"I did."

"I wouldn't have thought of such a thing in a coon's age," said Beaseley, looking at his companion admiringly. "And if I had, I shouldn't have known how to go to work to bring it about."

"I was good at mathematics at school," replied Jack. "I calculated the size and cubical capacity necessary in a

house-boat capable of carrying, say, three thousand bushels of wheat in perfect safety down a river like the Mississippi, as well as making allowance for a small living compartment for the navigators themselves."

"Gee! You're as good as a school-teacher."

"Of course, I don't mean to attempt to build a real boat. I'm not a naval architect, nor a ship-builder. My idea is to construct a serviceable raft first as the foundation for the house in which I expect to store the grain in transit."

"I'll bet you'll do it all right," answered Beaseley, confidently. "Whatever you set out to do I guess you accomplish, or know the reason why."

"You seem to have a pretty good opinion of my abilities, Joe," smiled Jack.

"You can bet your boots I have; but I know one chap who hasn't," grinned Joe.

"Do you mean Felix Plunkett?"

"I do that. That fellow gives me a pain with his dandified airs. He thinks because his old man is the boss store-keeper and the postmaster of Eden that he's It. Well, he isn't by a long shot. He's jealous of you. It's like waving a red flag before a wild bull to mention your name before him. He can't say anything too mean about you. And what good does it do him? The little fool can't see that nobody takes any stock in what he says against you."

"I certainly try to do the right thing by everybody," said Jack.

"Of course you do. You're the most popular fellow in the county, bar none."

"Come off, Joe."

"I won't come off. I'm telling you the cold fact. All the boys like you and speak well of you, except Plunkett and two or three of his cronies, who side in with him because it's to their interest to do so. As for the girls! Well, say! You're first favorite from the fall of the flag."

"Aren't you trying to get me stuck on myself?" grinned Frost.

"Ho! You aren't built that way, Jack," and Beaseley wagged his head in a conclusive kind of way. "You can't tell me you aren't the real persimmons. Is there a social gathering for miles around where us young folks are in the majority that is considered complete without you? No, siree! That voice of yours, and the way you make your fingers prance over the strings of your banjo, wins every time."

"Then my popularity, as you call it, is really due to the fact that I possess the ability to entertain an audience. Is that it? You might give Plunkett the tip, then, if he has the grit, he might learn to play the instrument, and thus acquire the ascendancy he is so eager to possess."

"Pooh! He'd make a fine banjo player, I don't think. Besides, he can't sing worth sour apples. Even if he could play and sing as well as you it wouldn't make him really popular. Just the same, if you lost your voice and a finger or two, so you couldn't sing or play any more, you wouldn't be liked a wee bit less. It's the boy himself, and not what he can do in the entertainment line, which counts. Do you

want to know the real reason why Felix Plunkett is dead nuts on you?"

"Oh, I'm not particularly curious," replied Jack, carelessly.

"I'm going to tell you, anyway. It's because you've cut him out with Virginia Earle."

Miss Earle was the eldest daughter of Gordon Earle, cashier of the Eden National Bank.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Jack, flushing through the tan of his countenance.

"Is that so? I'm giving it to you straight, Jack. You only met her once, I know, at that party she attended at Carden's farm. Carden is her uncle. Plunkett was there, too, and you ought to remember how mad he was all the evening because you danced three times with Virginia and took her in to supper. All the boys said you were mashed on her."

Jack kept his head turned away while Joe was speaking.

"Well, she's been just crazy to meet you again."

"What are you giving me, Joe Beaseley?" asked Jack, in some confusion.

"I'm giving you the truth. You ought to feel good over it, for Virginia Earle is called the prettiest girl in Eden County."

Jack made no reply.

"Felix is plumb gone on her, and it exasperates him to know that she thinks so much of you and doesn't seem the least bit interested in him. He persists in forcing his attentions upon her, though the fellows tell me she hands him out plain hints enough to settle any other boy; but he's too thick to tumble to the truth."

"I'm not surprised," replied Jack. "But here we are at the end of our cruise. What do you think of that?" and the boy pointed at a bend in the stream which ran into the marsh.

CHAPTER III.

HARVESTING THE TIMBER.

PILED up before them the boys saw a heap of logs, planks, boards and other fugitive lumber which had come down from the saw-mills, miles up the country.

One end of a big log had been driven ashore by the current and had jammed itself between two trees.

All the rest of the boards, planks and timbers had rested upon this one, and, being driven in by the sweep of the stream at the bend, had been entangled and held by it.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Joe Beaseley, in no little astonishment, "what a lot of wood is there."

"I should say there is. Enough to build several rafts."

"With a house on each of them."

"Perhaps. It would all depend on the size of the rafts and the houses."

"Oh, I meant small ones."

"We shall be doing the neighborhood a service by removing this wood."

"How so?"

"Can't you see that it is gradually choking the stream up?"

"Sure thing. A blind man could see that."

"Why, how could a blind man see that, or anything else?" asked Jack, looking inquiringly at his companion.

"Oh, you know what I mean. I meant a man must be blind who couldn't see it."

"That's more like it. If that heap isn't cleared away the whole course of the stream will be choked by it in time. Then, when the snow melts next spring our farms, and many others in this vicinity, will be overflowed by the high water, and there would be the dickens to pay."

"I guess there would be," admitted Joe.

"We don't need all that lumber for our raft," said Jack, as he scanned the pile critically, "but it would be a pity not to save it, though it would cost a good deal of hard labor. It would come in handy in a good many ways."

"I'm willing to help you save it," said Joe. "I don't mind a little hard work, for I'm used to it."

"Well, we'll consider that later on."

"You're not going to build the raft up here, are you?"

"Of course not."

"Going to let the stuff float down through the swamp, eh?"

"That's my idea. The current will carry it to the creek. You may not have noticed, but the swing of the current where it empties into the creek sets right in to a bit of ground at the extreme point of our farm. I have driven several poles down into the bottom at a certain point, leaving the ends sticking several feet above the water. They'll catch the first logs we send down, and the rest will pile on top or jam up against them. A few may escape into the creek, but not many."

"You've got a great head, Jack."

"There's nothing particularly smart about that. It's merely an illustration of cause and effect—the same principle which has caused this accidental dam here."

"I suppose we may as well start in to throw these planks and boards into the current. It'll take some time, you know," viewing the amount of labor involved somewhat doubtfully.

"Is that the way you'd engineer the job, Joe?" laughed Frost.

"Why, how else would you do it?"

"There's an easier and much better way."

"If there is I want to know it," said Joe. "I'm not anxious to do any more work than is necessary."

"What do you suppose I brought that rope for?"

"You've got me. I'm not bright at guessing riddles."

"Well, I'll show you. Just make a sliding loop at that end, will you?"

"Sure," and Beaseley hastened to comply with this request. "There you are."

"Now crawl out onto that lumber, reach down over the end and hook the loop over the nose of that mischievous log which has caused all this trouble."

Joe followed the directions to the letter, and then stood up, watching to see what was going to occur.

"Do you want to get a good sousing and some heavy cracks on the head?" shouted Frost at him.

"Not on your life I don't," returned Beaseley, not moving, however.

"Then come back here."

"What for? This is a nice, airy spot where I am."

"Is it?" laughed Jack. "If the foundation was to come away from underneath your feet all of a sudden you'd think differently."

"Any danger of it doing that?" asked Joe, in some alarm, hastily moving toward where his companion stood on a projecting point of the shore.

"Not until you give me the benefit of your muscles."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to yank the key log out from under that pile after I cut away a part of the end here where it's caught in this tree."

"Oh, I see. That'll let the whole pile of stuff down with a rush," replied Joe, who could see through a millstone when the hole was pointed out to him.

"I rather think it will. Then the surplus water above will follow and push the lumber and logs before it. There's only one obstacle which may temporarily disarrange my project."

"What is that?"

"The timber may get caught at some point in the swamp and pile up again."

"We can easily set them free again," replied Joe, confidently.

"Can we? I don't know about that," answered Jack, doubtfully.

"Why not?" asked Beaseley, in surprise.

"It may get jammed where we couldn't reach it on the raft."

"What would you do in that case?"

"I don't propose to cross a bridge until I come to it. In other words, I'm not going to worry about such a thing until it actually takes place."

"That's right. I agree with you there. Do you want me to do the chopping here?"

"You can begin if you're anxious for the exercise. When you get tired I'll lend a hand."

Beaseley took the hatchet and began at the job.

The log proved to be a more stubborn proposition than they had calculated on.

Joe hacked away for a quarter of an hour, and then Jack relieved him.

In the course of half an hour, however, they weakened the log to such an extent that Frost believed their muscles would do the rest.

So they got hold of the rope and began to exert themselves.

Inch by inch the key of the lumber structure began to yield.

Planks and slabs and timber occasionally disengaged

themselves from the mass and started with the stream down through the swamp.

"Once more, old man," cried Jack, bracing himself for a mighty effort.

Joe put his foot against a convenient tree and then both pulled away for all they were worth.

Then something happened.

The key log suddenly came away with a rush, and Joe and Jack went heels over head backward, Beaseley narrowly escaping a ducking in the swamp.

"Wow!" howled Joe, sitting up and rubbing the dirt out of his eyes.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jack, who was the first to pick himself up.

"I don't see anything funny about that," grumbled Beaseley, feeling his back and other parts of his body, to make sure he was still whole. "I nearly busted my back."

"A miss is as good as a mile, old fellow," grinned Frost.

"You wouldn't say that if you'd got the whack in the jaw I caught," objected his companion.

"Get up and watch the lumber shoot."

Joe got up and looked.

"It's a regular mill-stream now, isn't it?"

"That won't last long."

"Do we go back on the raft?"

"Of course. I want to see that the channel through the swamp keeps clear. If it chokes up we've got to assist things if we can."

"Suppose we get stuck ourselves in the heart of the old morass?"

"Oh, don't begin supposing trouble is going to occur. You might hoodoo the whole scheme."

"I wouldn't like to do that," replied Joe, so seriously that Jack had to laugh at him.

"If you're ready we'll go afloat. It's breakfast time by now, and I'm beginning to get hungry," he said, stepping onto the raft.

"Same here," replied Joe, following him with alacrity.

They cast off, poled the raft into the current and then allowed things to take their course, which they did in a very satisfactory manner.

Wherever they came across logs or pieces of timber caught in the projections of the swamp they pushed them clear.

In this way they continued on down through the morass toward the creek, preceded, surrounded and followed by a great company of fugitive timber.

Fortunately no serious difficulty was encountered during the trip, which was a great deal shorter than when they had to pole the raft up stream.

They arrived at length at their destination, where they found the advance lumber anchored to the obstructing poles placed at the point of the bight by Jack.

"The whole collection will be here in an hour," said Frost. "If it's all the same to you, Joe, we'll go to breakfast now. You eat with me, of course."

CHAPTER IV.

A LEAP FOR LIFE.

AFTER breakfast Beaseley returned to the Greene farm to attend to certain chores about the place, while Jack employed himself in a similar way around his own place.

At one o'clock the two boys met again at the bight of land near the creek, and during the rest of the afternoon busied themselves hauling the fugitive timber onto dry land and separating it into individual piles, ready for business.

This work took up all of their spare time for several days.

At length they had sorted out as much timber as Jack calculated he could use in the construction of the raft, which, owing to the weight it would have to sustain, was designed to be quite a ponderous affair, so far as its foundation was concerned.

"We'll leave the rest of the stuff for future consideration," remarked Jack, as the two boys sat on an old log, resting, and watched the sun setting in all its glory in the west.

"I haven't any kick coming," grinned Joe, as he mopped the perspiration from his freckled forehead.

"You don't feel like backing out of the rest of the business, do you?" asked Frost, with a cheerful smile.

"I should say not. The most disagreeable and least interesting part is over. I'm just tickled to take hold of what is to come."

"You won't find it all fun."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm willing to take chances on that."

"I hope I won't make any mistakes in my calculations," said Jack. "If I do, we won't be able to carry all the wheat down the river, which would be a great pity and a big disappointment to me."

"Oh, I guess you'll come out all right," said Joe, reassuringly.

"There must be no guesswork about it," asserted Frost. "The moment such a thing as that enters into the scheme we'll be all at sea."

"If it was my wheat I'd be willing to take chances on you making a success of your plan."

"Much obliged, Joe. You seem to put lots of confidence in me."

"Sure. Why not?" replied Beaseley, stoutly.

"Well, the proof of the pudding is in the eating," replied Jack, rising. "To-morrow morning I'm going to town to purchase the necessary hardware with which to begin operations. Want to come along?"

"Of course I do."

"All right. I'll have the mare harnessed up ready to start about nine o'clock. I'll look for you about that time."

The boys started off together, and separated in the Harper farmyard, Joe proceeding on through the gate, down the lane, and, vaulting the first fence he came to, cut across the fields to the Greene farm.

Next morning he was on hand in plenty of time, and helped Jack harness up his favorite roadster.

Then they started for Eden in high spirits.

They drove into town as the clocks were striking ten.

Nathan Plunkett kept all the articles in his store that Jack expected to purchase, but somehow or another the boy didn't care to trade with him as long as there were other stores in town that could supply his wants.

He stopped in front of Josiah Allen's store, Mr. Plunkett's most successful business opponent, and the postmaster, who happened to be looking out of his window at the time, took note of the fact, and the circumstance did not make Nathan feel any better disposed toward the boy he cordially detested, and on whom he hoped some day in the near future to have full satisfaction.

Jack purchased nails of two or three sizes, a small keg of spikes, a new saw, a stout hatchet and sundry other articles of hardware.

"Going to build a house?" asked the clerk, with a grin.

"Sure," replied Jack. "I'm thinking of getting married and setting up housekeeping."

"Don't forget to invite me to the wedding."

"I'll keep you in mind. Here, Joe, carry these packages out to the wagon and watch the team. I'm going over to the postoffice to see if there's any mail for us."

There was a letter for his aunt, which Felix Plunkett handed out to him in an ungracious way, as if it went against his grain to wait on Frost.

While he was in the act of putting it in his pocket the fire-alarm bell rang, and Felix vaulted over the counter and ran to the door.

A few moments later one of the fire engines, a steamer lately imported from Chicago, dashed by with a jingle of bells.

Jack left the store in a hurry and crossed over to his team.

"Drive ahead, Joe. Let's see where the fire is."

Beaseley kept the engine in sight until he saw it draw up near a fire-plug on a corner a dozen blocks from where they started.

They were now in the residential section of Eden, where many of the better-class citizens of the town had their homes.

A crowd was already gathering in the vicinity of a pretentious-looking three-story dwelling; from nearly every one of the front windows smoke was issuing, though not densely.

Joe drew the mare up near the off curb and then directed his attention toward the imperiled house.

"Good gracious!" he suddenly exclaimed. "That's Gordon Earle's house."

"You don't mean Virginia Earle's—"

"Yes, I do. That's Virginia Earle's home. Hey, where are you going, Jack?"

Frost had sprung to the street and was running toward the burning house.

"Has the family got out?" asked Jack of a policeman who was endeavoring to establish a fire line in that direction.

"I couldn't tell you. Stand back, please."

The boy, in some excitement, slipped away and addressed the same question to two or three of the spectators in turn, but they could give him no information.

Further on he tackled another policeman, but the man, instead of answering his question, pushed him roughly back into the crowd of curious onlookers.

At this juncture the crowd exhibited a sudden spasm of excitement.

Jack looked toward the scene of the fire and saw the form of a girl, which, even at that distance, his sharp eyes recognized as Virginia Earle, leaning out of a side window on the third floor, toward the rear of the house, where it joined a three-story brick structure.

The smoke was sifting out of the window all around her, and her position was apparently one of great peril.

Even as the boy looked she was joined by a little, golden-haired creature, whom Jack knew to be Virginia's sister.

The sight of the girl, who had occupied a great share of his thoughts ever since he was introduced to her some six weeks before at Carden's farm, standing in imminent danger of losing her life, with no one seemingly going to her assistance, aroused Jack to a fever of excitement.

He burst through the crowd, eluded the policeman who sought to stay his course, dashed across the street and, springing up the front steps of the Earle dwelling, disappeared inside the house, battling his way upward through the smoke, which was filling every nook and corner, in a frantic effort to reach the third floor and the imperiled girls in the rear.

When he arrived at the second floor landing he saw that the rooms in the back were blazing furiously, indicating that the fire had originated in this part of the house.

Jack realized that Virginia and her little sister were standing right over this sea of flame, which at any moment might burst through the ceiling and cut them off from all hope of rescue.

It was slow and suffocating work for him to make his way to the landing of the third floor through the choking smoke, which made his eyes run water and his lungs pant for a breath of fresh air.

But he persevered, for he knew the lives of the two girls were at stake, and might depend entirely upon his personal efforts.

He reached the upper landing at last, rushed to a front window, where he leaned out, dizzy and half-choked, and drew in copious draughts of air, until he felt in a measure recovered.

The crowd in front saw him and set up a shout.

The boy did not seem to hear or notice them, and soon withdrew from the window and began fighting his way to the rear.

Already the flames were eating their way through the flooring of the passage, and he could see the glare from other flames beyond through the dun-colored smoke.

To proceed slowly and cautiously any longer in this direction Jack saw was folly; he would only be overcome by the smoke.

He must make a bold dash for the room where Virginia and her sister had taken refuge.

And he did, stumbling and reeling like a drunken man into the chamber where, through the misty cloud of smoke, he saw the shadowy forms of the two girls at the window.

In another moment he was standing by their side, and Virginia, who had a short length of stout clothesline in her hand, recognized him with a glad cry.

"Jack, you will save us, will you not?" she exclaimed, almost piteously.

"I will," he replied, gamely, "or perish with you in the flames."

He looked out of the window to see what the firemen were doing to effect the rescue of the girls.

There were a number of them in the yard below, some carrying in a line of hose, others yelling and gesticulating violently to the hook-and-ladder people, who had just arrived, to bring on their ladders.

"Oh, heavens!" cried Virginia, throwing one of her arms around Jack's neck in a spasm of terror. "The room is filling with fire!"

Her little sister seemed stricken speechless with fear, for she never uttered a sound.

The flames were encroaching so fast upon them from behind that Frost saw that their position would be absolutely untenable before the firemen could get a ladder up to the window.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "Something must be done, or we three will surely be sacrificed."

He glanced down at the ground, forty feet below, and then at the roof, close at hand, of the adjoining building.

In a moment he had made up his mind what he would do.

It was a desperate expedient, but necessity knows no law.

He removed his jacket and threw it far out into the yard; then he snatched the short clothesline from Virginia's grasp and hurriedly made one end fast to the leg of the single bed, the head of which stood near the window.

"I'm going to try to reach yonder roof by springing to it from the sill outside. If I am successful, quickly unfasten the end of the line I have tied to the bed and fasten it around your sister under her arms, and I'll draw her up there. After that I'll throw the rope back to you, and you must tie yourself in a similar manner. Do you understand?"

She nodded in a terrified way.

There was no time to be lost if he hoped to carry his plan to a successful issue.

The flames were already reaching for them.

He tied the rope securely around his waist, stepped out on the sill and measured with his eyes the distance he proposed to jump.

Then, nerving himself for the effort, he leaped upward.

CHAPTER V.

COMMENCING OPERATIONS.

A HUNDRED pair of eyes were on Jack Frost when he made his thrilling spring for the adjoining roof, and a

great cheer broke from as many throats when it was seen that he had caught onto the ledge and hung there for a moment dangling in mid-air.

Then his muscles of steel came into full play.

He drew himself up until his chin rested on the coping, and then with a mighty effort he swung his legs outward and upward and landed upon the edge of the cornice.

It was comparatively easy for him to scramble to the roof.

"Quick, Virginia," he cried to the girl, who had watched his risky feat with distended eyes. "Unfasten the rope and put it about your sister."

The girl seemed to wake from her trance and hastened to obey his order.

As soon as she had tied the line properly under the child's arms she lifted her onto the window-sill.

"Swing off, little one," cried Jack, pulling upon her and dislodging her from her foothold.

The little girl uttered a thrilling scream, for she thought she was falling.

But she wasn't.

She was sailing up through the air as fast as the boy could work his arms.

In a moment or two he had her safe on the roof and was unfastening the line.

"Catch!" shouted Jack, throwing the rope-end back to Virginia.

The girl caught it and began at once to tie it around herself.

Then she bravely stepped out on the sill.

And it was high time that she did, for her dress was already smoking, and the fire was creeping up all about the spot she had but just left.

"Now swing off!" cried Jack, bracing himself to meet her weight.

She obeyed him, and he started to pull like a good fellow.

As she came within arm's reach of the coping she grasped it.

Jack seized her by the arms and pulled her over onto the roof.

"Thank heaven! You are safe!" said the boy, fervently.

Virginia gave a little gasp as she looked into his eyes, realized that her danger was over, and then the reaction overcame her and she fainted dead away.

At that moment the scuttle in the roof, a little distance away, was thrown back and a couple of firemen appeared.

They were surprised to find Frost and the two girls up there, for they hadn't seen Jack's leap, nor the rescue which followed.

"How did you get here?" one asked the boy.

"I jumped for this roof, was lucky to reach the coping, and then with this line I pulled the girls up."

"Well, you're a nervy chap," replied the fireman, admiringly.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Joe, lightly. "It was neck or nothing with the three of us, and when one's life is in danger nothing is too risky to attempt."

"This girl seems to have fainted," said the man, noticing

the limp form of Virginia lying in Jack's arms. "We'll take her down to the street."

"I wish you would," replied the boy.

Frost followed in the rear of the procession, and in a couple of minutes the two daughters of the bank cashier were carried into a residence on the other side of the rear street.

Jack thought it time to get back to Joe and his team.

He was elated, because not only had he done his duty nobly, but had saved the lives of two helpless girls, one of whom he liked better than any one else in this world, not excepting his Aunt Lucy, and that was saying a great deal.

First, however, he had to recover his jacket, which he had removed just before making his great leap for the roof, and which he had cast into the yard as far as possible from the blazing building, now a mass of flames from the first floor to the roof.

He found that one of the firemen had carried his jacket outside and placed it on the hook-and-ladder truck so it would be out of harm's way.

He put it on, pushed his way through the crowd, avoiding a local reporter who was after him, and reached his wagon, where Joe was watching the flames and wondering what had become of his companion.

Beaseley did not witness Frost's rescue of the two girls, as the wagon was too far away, and did not dream that Jack was otherwise employed than as a front row spectator of the conflagration.

"Jumping Christopher! What's the matter with your face?" exclaimed Joe, when his friend climbed up on the seat beside him. "You're like a smoked ham. You must have been pretty close to the fire."

"I was," grinned Jack, who, now that he was out of all danger and the girls were safe, was disposed to make light of his thrilling adventure.

"Where were you? I suppose the Earles all got out safely?"

"They got out all right."

"Did you see any of them?"

"I saw Miss Virginia and her little sister."

"They must feel all cut up over the loss of their home. The place seems to be completely gutted out."

"It certainly is. The house caught fire in the rear."

"In the kitchen, I suppose?"

"No. Upstairs on the second floor."

"Well, it's too bad. What was all that shouting about a little while ago? There seemed to be excitement to burn. I thought probably some of the Earle family were being rescued from the building by the firemen with their ladders."

"The cause of the excitement," replied Jack, slowly, "was due to the fact that Miss Virginia and her sister were cut off by the flames from escape through the front of the house, and were assisted from the window of a room where they had taken refuge to the roof of the adjoining building."

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Joe, in some excitement. "I wish I had seen that."

"I think we've wasted time enough here, Joe," said Frost, taking up the reins and turning the mare's head down the street. "I've got a few more things to buy, and then we'll start for home."

They reached the farm about one o'clock, deposited their purchases in the small barn and went in to dinner.

After the meal they loaded on a barrow such implements as they needed to begin work with and wheeled them down to the scene of their operations.

The afternoon was employed in cutting down six stout trees, which provided them with foundation logs thirty feet long, which they carefully trimmed.

In each of these they chopped out wide notches, exactly two feet apart, and of a depth sufficient to receive and hold the twelve-foot stout slabs they proposed to spike into place next morning.

Promptly at sunrise the boys were on hand to resume work upon the craft. Jack put so much dependence on.

"We'll take our morning bath first," remarked Frost, getting out of his clothes as fast as he could, and his example was quickly followed by Joe.

After they had disported themselves for ten minutes in the basin Jack said:

"We'll begin the framework of the raft before we dress, as we've got to put it together on the water. Fetch a couple of those slabs while I get the small sledgehammer and a handful of spikes."

Then they placed two of the logs side by side, close to the shore.

Jack spiked each end of the two slabs to the inner log, at the extremities of it. Then he and Joe rolled the outer log away from the other until the two were twelve feet apart, and the other end of each slab was spiked to it, thus forming the shape of a raft—thirty feet long and twelve feet wide.

"Now, Joe, we'll push each of the other logs one by one into place and spike the slabs to them."

This work was immediately carried out, and thus the six foundation logs were secured in place at equal distances apart.

"Now for the balance of the slabs," said Frost.

The thirteen remaining slabs were spiked into the notches which had been provided to receive them, and the boys concluded they had done enough until after breakfast.

They resumed their clothes and viewed with a great deal of satisfaction the stout framework on which they were to build the upper works of their novel craft.

Then they went to breakfast.

CHAPTER VI.

BUILDING THE RAFT.

At nine o'clock the boys were back again at the basin, full of enthusiasm for the work in hand.

"I see wheat is a dollar and ten," said Jack. "Old man Fogarty told my aunt so this morning."

"That's good. Perhaps it will be a dollar and a quarter by the time we have this raft completed. I wish I had a few thousand bushels to sell," he added, with a cheerful grin.

"What do you think? Nathan Plunkett offered us seventy-five cents a bushel for it nearly a week ago, when the papers quoted the price at the grain centers as one dollar."

"Plunkett wants the earth."

"Well, he was prepared to pay cash for it just as it stood in our barn. It would have cost him something to ship and sell it. But I am sure he had a pretty good idea that it would go up. At any rate, he expected us to hold it for him for two weeks, at any rate, perhaps longer, which would give him the benefit of the expected rise."

"Well, if he offered you a dollar now for it just as it stands, would you take it and give up the raft scheme?"

"I would not. I am satisfied wheat is going higher. It might even go to one dollar and fifty cents, though I hardly think so. Still, there is always a chance of such a figure when these big grain operators of the Chicago Board of Trade try to corner the product of the country."

"It's a fine thing for the big wheat growers out West here when the price does get to soaring."

"That's what is is. Come now, get busy; we've lots of work on our hands to-day."

"I'm ready. What'll I do first?"

"There are a lot of large logs that came down with the rest of the stuff."

"I see them."

"We must get enough of them ashore to fit in between those slabs and make a solid foundation for the next tier to rest on."

"We can do that all right," said Joe, with alacrity.

"We only want to use those that are about twelve foot and over in length. Where they are too long we'll cut them down. I suppose you like to saw?" with a grin.

"Oh, I'm dead stuck on it."

"You will have lots of practice, then, before we have done with the raft."

"Fetch along your log and your saw and see me go through it like greased lightning."

"You tell it well, Joe, but you'll sing another song when the perspiration begins to come."

"Ho! You haven't seen me work yet."

"Haven't I? I thought you put in some pretty good strokes yesterday afternoon. If you can improve on that you're all to the good, old man."

"Mr. Greene says I'm the best worker on the farm."

"I'm glad to hear it. It does you credit. The world has no use for lazy people these days. I've seen a lot of them in the city, sitting on the benches in the parks, or gathering about open lots where excavation was going on. However, I don't mean to say all these people were naturally lazy or shirked work. Some of them, no doubt, would gladly have gone to work if they could have found the work to do. Unless a man is a skilled worker at some prosperous trade

it is not so easy to find a job in a big city, where there are a dozen applicants for each position open. I have heard it said that there are one hundred and fifty thousand people continuously idle in New York City, and not necessarily through their own fault, either.

"Now, Joe, there's a log that is too long. Just measure off twelve feet with that two-foot rule and then saw the surplus length off."

Beaseley proceeded to follow orders, while Jack began to shave down to a flat surface one side of each end of the logs they had hauled ashore.

After the necessary number of logs had been prepared the boys rolled them one by one onto the raft and spiked them into place.

"That raft as it is now ought to sustain a pretty heavy weight," remarked Joe, looking at it critically.

"It will; but it isn't near buoyant enough to hold sixty-odd tons of wheat."

"Will the wheat weigh as much as that?" asked Beaseley.

"Yes. I have estimated that we have easily a big freight-car load and a half. The new cars are said to have a capacity of eighty thousand pounds. Our wheat, therefore, weighs, all told, one hundred and twenty thousand pounds."

"And you think we'll be able to carry all that on this raft to St. Louis?"

"Sure as you live, Joe, if my constructive ideas pan out correctly."

"All right. I'm ready to take your word for it," replied Joe, cheerfully.

"Now, Joe, we'll nail some more slabs lengthwise; any old size will do, so that they don't overlap the water too far at the ends. Leave sufficient space between the layers for another tier of logs, which, of course, may also be of varying sizes. Understand?"

"Sure thing," replied Beaseley, going to work laying the slabs into place, with Jack helping him.

When the requisite number of slabs had been nailed down on the logs, Frost put a few more spikes into the first tier to make sure that everything would hold together, even under trying circumstances, and then he and Joe set to work to spike down the second tier.

"This is the highest raft I ever saw," said Beaseley, when they paused for a brief rest.

"That's because there's no weight on it yet to push it down into the water. Just wait till we begin to load the wheat on board and you'll see it sink."

"It looks stable enough to float a loaded freight car."

"Don't you believe it. I've arranged for a number of empty barrels I'm going to attach around on both sides. That will give me the real buoyancy I'm after."

"Well, well; what a head you've got, Jack!"

"That's as old as the hills."

"I know that, but I never would have thought of putting them into use."

"You want to think when you start to plan a thing. That's what your brains were made for. Come now, you're cool enough, and the afternoon is getting on. We will put a layer of planks down now."

"That's where I spread myself," grinned Beaseley.

"Is it? See that you do yourself proud, then."

"You just watch me. I'm a born carpenter. Mr. Greene gets me to do all the jobbing around the place. I wouldn't be surprised if he had me build him a new farm-house."

The sound of the dinner-horn in the distance, however, put a stop to work for the time being, and Joe reluctantly dropped the first board he was hauling on board of the raft.

A surprise awaited Jack when he went into the house, all flushed from his strenuous labor of the morning.

He had noticed a buggy standing in the yard, and wondered who their visitor was, but was not prepared to see Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Earle and Virginia and her sister, who had arrived a little while before.

Mr. Earle rose from his chair and seized the boy by the hand.

"My dear lad, how are we to express the gratitude we feel toward you for saving the lives of our two children under the most dreadful of circumstances? It was a magnificent example of true heroism. But for you I am assured we should now be childless."

His voice shook and there were tears in his eyes.

Jack was greatly embarrassed and hardly knew what to say, the more so as Mrs. Earle took a hand in the proceedings, and said so many pretty things about him, and assured him of their grateful appreciation.

"I only did what I thought was the proper thing in such an emergency," he stammered.

"You put your own life in jeopardy to save Virginia and her sister, my lad. There's no question about that. I've had accounts of the affair from a dozen eye-witnesses. That leap you took to the roof of the rear building was a splendid exhibition of cool nerve and judgment. Only for that all of you would have perished before the firemen could have reached you. I want you to understand that Mrs. Earle and myself are truly grateful to you, and that we fully appreciate the debt of gratitude you have placed us under," said the bank cashier, shaking the boy's hand once more in a warm and feeling manner. "As for Virginia herself, she is waiting impatiently to thank you, and so is our little Jessie. Both of them will remember what they owe you as long as they live."

"Why, Jack never told me a word about what he had done at the fire," said Mrs. Harper to Mrs. Earle, as Virginia came forward, took Jack's hand in hers and thanked him repeatedly for the great service he had rendered her and her sister."

"I am very glad I was on hand at such a critical moment to help you," said the boy, blushing to the roots of his hair. "I am always glad to be of service to my friends, especially to you, Miss Earle."

"You say that very nicely," replied Virginia, with a smile and a blush. "We must be very good friends after this."

"I hope we will."

"Why, of course we will. You must call and see us often. Papa has rented a house on Jefferson Street until

we rebuild the old site. As soon as we move in, which will be some time next week, you must come and spend a whole afternoon and evening."

"I shall be very glad to do so, Miss Earle."

"I shall hold you to your word, remember," she said, with a winsome smile. "Now speak to Jessie. The poor child is just dying to say something to you."

The Earles accepted an invitation to stay to dinner.

Virginia was placed next to Jack, and she had lots to say to him during the meal.

Frost thought he had never met so pretty and sprightly a young miss, and he was more than ever charmed with her.

In fact, the two young people were very much taken up with each other, a fact which did not escape the observation of Jack's aunt, who smiled and thought the intimacy a very desirable one for her nephew, as the Earles were looked upon as people of considerable social importance in Eden.

After dinner the visitors prepared to take their leave.

Mr. and Mrs. Earle had more nice things to say to Jack, and wound up by assuring the boy that he would always be a most welcome visitor at their home.

"Virginia Earle is a very pretty and sweet girl, isn't she, Jack?" remarked his aunt, as the callers drove off toward town.

"Yes, aunty, she is, indeed."

"Do you know, I ought to scold you very much for not telling me how heroically you acted at the fire," she smiled, tapping the boy fondly on his cheek. "All you told me was that there had been a big fire in Eden, which had destroyed Mr. Earle's house. Don't you know you did a big thing when you saved those girls in such a remarkable way?"

"Well, auntie, you don't want me to go around blowing my own horn, do you? When a person knows he has done his duty in a tight place, that ought to be satisfaction enough for him. I hate to be complimented and patted on the back, just as if I was a little boy, because I happened to have done something out of the ordinary."

"At any rate, you have made some very nice and good friends for yourself. Mr. Earle will, no doubt, be of great service to you some day."

"I've no objection to making real friends. A person can't have too many of that sort. But I'll never have a better friend in this world than you, auntie," and he gave her an affectionate hug.

"I hope not, dear, at least until you find some one you will learn to love and mean to marry. When that time comes, Jack, I hope she will be as lovely a girl as Virginia Earle," and she looked at him slyly.

Jack blushed vividly, gave his aunt a kiss and ran out of the house.

When he got back to the basin he found that Beaseley had been most industrious since he resumed work after dinner.

He had nearly finished covering the second tier of logs with planks, and had performed the job in a very creditable manner.

"You're all to the good, Joe," said Jack, as he took off

his jacket. "Sorry I was behind time, but my aunt had visitors and I couldn't get away."

The boys worked away so diligently that by sundown they had the raft about half finished, and a very substantial-looking craft it was even at this stage.

CHAPTER VII.

A PLOT AGAINST THE WHEAT.

MRS. HARPER knew that her nephew and his friend Beaseley were engaged upon some enterprise in which they took an unusual interest, but as Jack said nothing to her about the nature of the work she made no inquiries, being fully satisfied that whatever the boy gave his time to was all right, and that he would no doubt tell her all about it in good time.

That evening she mentioned the subject of the shipment of the wheat.

"There is no hurry, auntie," Jack told her. "Wheat is going up every day. You know, Mr. Fogarty told you it was one dollar and ten cents this morning."

"Yes, Jack; but, you know, I shall soon need the money to take up the mortgage."

"That will be all right. You have four weeks yet to provide for it. Even if you didn't ship it, and the price continued to rise, you could easily get a loan on it that would see you through. I am arranging now to ship the grain inside of the next ten days, unless it should be considered advisable to hold on longer for a higher price."

"Do as you think best, Jack. I rely entirely on you."

"I shan't fail you, you may depend."

Jack and Joe returned to the construction of the raft next morning at sunrise, worked like Trojans all day, and when they finally knocked off they had the satisfaction of knowing that the raft itself was finished.

It only remained to build the superstructure or house in which Jack expected to carry his aunt's wheat to the elevator at St. Louis.

This was the most pleasing part of the job, because it promised to be the most difficult of accomplishment.

The structure was to be a sort of Noah's Ark in appearance, and was to occupy a space ten feet by twenty-five, and to be high enough to accommodate the cargo without being top-heavy.

The deck of the raft had been extended a foot and a half beyond the hull part on the sides, making the width fifteen feet, and had been rounded out five additional feet forward and the same amount aft, making the extreme length over all forty feet.

A small, light addition was to be built onto the after part of the cargo-house to serve as sleeping quarters.

They expected to cook and eat in the open air, weather permitting, using a small stove imbedded in a sand-box.

Jack had his plans down fine, and Joe fell in with them as though they were manufactured to his order.

The next day was Sunday, and, of course, nothing was done on the raft, though both Jack and Joe visited the basin to see that everything was just as they had left them the previous evening.

The boys, as usual, went to meeting at the little brick church at the cross-roads, and afterward attended Sunday-school.

Then they parted for dinner.

Joe spent the afternoon with Jack, and the boys talked enthusiastically about the good time they expected to have navigating the Chippewa and Mississippi Rivers.

"And what will you do with the raft after you are done with it? Seems a pity to let it go for firewood, after all the trouble we will have gone to, after it's completed."

"It wouldn't pay to have it towed 'way back up here," replied Jack. "I may be able to sell it as a marine curiosity."

"It will be that all right when we are done with it," snickered Beaseley. "I say, what's the matter with our advertising her in the St. Louis papers as the only and original Noah's Ark, on exhibition at such a place, general admission one nickel?"

"Well, Joe, you have thought up an original idea at last, haven't you?"

"Oh, you don't know me yet, Jack. My head is chock-full of the brightest things under the sun, only I can't always fish them out when they're wanted."

"I sympathize with you, old man. Come, let's go to supper, then we'll go over and see Will Benson and see if we can't make life miserable for him for an hour or two."

Will Benson was a mutual friend who lived a mile and a half from the Harper farm, and, as he had a couple of interesting sisters, to one of whom Joe Beaseley was somewhat partial, the boys often found it to their taste to go over to the Benson farm and spend an evening.

They had their usual good time on this occasion, and left the Benson place a little after nine to return to their homes.

The weather looked threatening, and there was every indication that it would rain before morning.

This was not a desirable outlook for Jack and Joe, as it would interfere with the raft enterprise, and Jack especially was anxious to get the craft finished as soon as possible.

"It will be fierce if it rains to-morrow," said Beaseley, casting a doubtful glance at the sky.

"I should say it would," replied Jack, finding little consolation in the stormy aspect of the heavens. "However, it may rain during the night and clear off by the morning."

"That wouldn't be so bad; but I'm afraid we can't expect any such good luck. That sky looks as if it was getting ready for a week's business."

"A week! I should hope not. That would give us an awful setback."

"Well, you can't put any dependence at all in the weather. If it starts in to rain to-night, it is liable to keep

it up for twenty-four hours, or forty-eight, for that matter. I wouldn't be surprised if it acted that way just to spite us."

Something damp and clinging struck Jack on the nose at that moment.

He held out his hand, and presently another drop of water fell on it.

"It's beginning to rain already," he said, gloomily.

"I see it is," coincided Beaseley.

They hastened their steps, for they had their good clothes on and didn't want to get them wet.

But the rain had very little consideration for them, and came down faster and faster, and pretty big drops at that.

"I guess we're in for a good soaking all right," grumbled Joe. "I don't like this even a little bit."

"Nor I, either," agreed Jack. "But we can take refuge in that old tumble-down shack on the other side of those trees until this downpour blows over. It won't last long, judging from the way it is starting to come down."

"I'm ready to put in anywhere there's a roof to keep off the moisture."

"Let's run, then," said Jack, starting off at a rapid pace. And Beaseley didn't lose a moment in following his lead.

They reached the shanty in good time to escape the worst of the shower, which began to beat upon the roof of the ruin at a smart rate as soon as they got under cover.

"We're lucky," chuckled Jack. "If we were out in that we'd soon be a sight for sore eyes."

"O Lor'!" exclaimed Joe, suddenly, making a quick move to one side.

"What's the matter?" asked Frost.

"Something must have given away on the roof," grumbled Beaseley, "for a stream of water struck me on the back of the neck just now and soaked me to the waist."

Jacked laughed, and then, fearing he might come in for a similar kind of bath, suggested that they get away back in a corner.

Hardly had they taken up their new position when they heard a noise outside and two men ran into the shanty.

"I wonder how long this is goin' to last, Plunkett?" said one of the newcomers, in surly tones.

"Oh, we've lots of time," replied his companion, in a voice familiar to Frost as belonging to the postmaster and storekeeper of Eden.

The boy, surprised to encounter Mr. Plunkett so far away from his usual stamping grounds, pressed Joe's arm and whispered in his ear to be as quiet as a mouse.

"Supposin' it keeps up all night, what then?" growled the first speaker.

"Oh, it won't keep up. It's early yet, and we might better be here than hugging a hedge," said the postmaster.

"I don't know but you're right, Plunkett. How far from here is the Harper farm?"

"About half a mile across the meadows."

"And where is the barn located that holds that there wheat?"

"Perhaps four hundred yards back of the house."

"Most of them kind of barns are raised on stilts like, a

few feet from the ground. Kind of helps to keep the stuff dry. It'll make a pretty bonfire, I reckon," and the wondering boys heard the fellow chuckle.

They couldn't understand what he meant, but they were not long kept in the dark as to the intentions of the two men.

"I hope it will," almost hissed Mr. Plunkett. "At the price wheat is going these days those two thousand bushels will save the farm to the widow and do me out of a good thing, unless we send it up in fire and smoke to-night."

"Ain't that what we're goin' to do? We didn't come away out here from town for nothin', I reckon."

"I should hope not. With the wheat lost to her, and no possibility of paying the mortgage, which comes due next month, I guess Mrs. Harper will be glad to listen to my terms if she wishes to keep a roof over her head," said Mr. Plunkett.

"And do you really mean to marry her?"

"That is my intention. She's a fine-looking little woman, not yet forty, and she just suits my idea of a second Mrs. Plunkett."

"And how do you think you suit her, eh?" said the postmaster's companion, with another chuckle. "I reckon she ain't exactly ready to take you for better or worse, or you wouldn't be so anxious to destroy her two thousand bushels of one-dollar-and-fifteen-cent wheat. It seems like an awful waste of good money, Plunkett; but I s'pose you've got to turn the screws on her, or she and the farm, too, will slip out of your grasp. You're a hard man, Plunkett, to run up against. I wouldn't like to owe you money I couldn't pay when the time came around."

"Don't get so gay, Monks," objected the Eden storekeeper. "I'm going to pay you well for this night's work, so you haven't any right to amuse yourself at my expense."

"Touchy, are you?" laughed the man called Monks. "I like to have my little joke, Plunkett. Kind of keeps me in good humor, I reckon. I see the rain is easing up a bit. What time do you s'pose it is?"

The postmaster pulled out his watch and then lit a match to consult it.

As the match flared up the boys held their breath and sat like two statues, for the light, while it lasted, plainly revealed their presence in the shanty.

But the backs of the two men were turned squarely upon them, and, as they did not turn around, having no suspicion that any one but their own two selves were in the place, Jack and Joe escaped their observation.

"Ten o'clock," reported Mr. Plunkett.

"I s'pose we'd better not make a move for an hour yet, to make sure. Most of the people hereabout turn in about nine, and eleven is a good time to get busy. Has Mrs. Harper got a dog about the place?"

"Yes, but we ought to be able to avoid it. You have the tools with you, haven't you, to force an entrance through the back door?"

"I reckon I have. I ain't a professional house-breaker, you know, but I can open a door or window or stab a lock

with the best of them. The knack comes natural to me. I was always clever at getting at the inside of things."

"Well, it isn't a hard job to get inside a barn, Monks, and this barn isn't any different to speak of from any other in the county. They're all built on the same plan. Once we're inside we'll have the game in our hands. Inside of ten minutes we'll have fired it in a dozen places. Mrs. Harper will sell no wheat this year, and before Christmas she'll be Mrs. Plunkett, or the farm will have a new tenant. In any case, it will have become my property, and that young cub, Jack Frost, will have to look for a living elsewhere."

Mr. Plunkett wound up his little speech with a venomous intensity that showed he meant every word of it.

At that moment something extraordinary happened.

The old, rickety box on which Jack and Joe were seated suddenly gave way without warning, precipitating the two boys backward against the wall of the shack with a loud crash.

They struck the time-worn boards with a shock that shook the shanty.

The wood, being rotten and insecurely held by the rusty nails, yielded in turn, and the boys fell outside in a heap, and did not stop rolling until they butted up against the trees at the foot of the incline back of the old shack.

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Beaseley, scrambling to his feet. "Was that an earthquake?"

"Hardly," laughed Frost, spitting out a mouthful of moist earth.

"Then what happened?"

"Why, don't you know?"

"Something gave away all at once. Maybe the shanty collapsed."

"No. You can see it standing there in the same old place."

"Then I give it up."

"Why, the box gave way under us, we fell through the back of the shanty and rolled down here, a dozen feet away. I wonder what Mr. Plunkett and his friend Monks thought about it. We must have given them a great shock," and the boy chuckled as he pictured in his mind the consternation of the two rascals.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON GUARD.

"Our clothes are in a nice state," grumbled Beaseley, picking off bits of damp soil from the front of his jacket as well as he could in the dark.

"Don't mention it, Joe," replied Jack, ruefully. "And they're our go-to-meeting togs at that."

"Hush!" whispered his companion. "That rascally Plunkett and his associate are investigating the cause of our mishap. I saw the flash of a match in the hole we punctured in the shack."

"Let's get back among the trees here, so they won't discover us," suggested Jack, and that plan was adopted.

It had almost stopped raining, but that fact didn't interest the boys as much as it had done previous to their tumble.

Their garments were a sight, and would have to be renovated before they could hope to put them on again; so a little superabundance of moisture didn't matter much now.

"Isn't that Nathan Plunkett an old scoundrel?" said Joe, when they had retired within the shelter of the little wood.

"I should say he is," answered Jack. "I never liked him, but I did not believe him to be so bad as to originate such a dastardly scheme as burning down our barn so as to destroy the two thousand bushels of wheat stored there and thus get my aunt's property completely in his clutches. He's a double-dyed rascal, if there ever was one."

"It's a mighty good thing we overheard those two skunks talking. Now we can put a spoke into their wheels. We'd better start right off for your barn and stand watch around the place. If we can catch old Plunkett at this little game I guess he stands a pretty good chance of going to jail."

"I should think he would," replied Jack, earnestly.

"He isn't very sweet on you, by the way he talks," snickered Joe.

"I've known that for some time. He's down on me because I'm making the farm pay. He had the idea at first that I would run it into the ground and thus tighten his grip on the property. As soon as he found out we were harvesting such a fine crop of wheat it broke him all up. He's been dead sore on me ever since."

"Maybe he'll be afraid to attempt to carry out his plan to-night, after what has happened," said Beaseley, as they were approaching the rear of the big barn where Mrs. Harper's grain was stored. "He must suspect that somebody was in the shanty all the time he and his companion were talking and, of course, overheard their conversation. I'll bet he's in a blue funk over it."

"Well, I'm not going to take any chances, if I have to stay up all night and watch," replied Jack, in a determined tone.

"I wouldn't, either. It's better to be sure than sorry," agreed Joe. "I'm willing to keep you company."

"I'm much obliged, Joe; but this isn't your funeral, and I have no right to ask you to lose your night's rest."

"Ho! Don't you s'pose I've got an interest in your wheat, too? I've put nearly three days of good, solid work on that raft because I expect to have a high old time sailing down the rivers on it. If that wheat should happen to be destroyed, all my labor and all my prospects of the good time I've been dreaming over would go up with it. No, siree bob! I can't afford to get it in the neck that way. I feel just like giving Mr. Plunkett one, two, three on the nut for contemplating such a rascally scheme," squaring off at an imaginary antagonist.

"We'll give him worse than that if we catch him at the trick," nodded Jack, in a tone which meant no good to the postmaster.

The boys took their position under the shadow of a small tool-house, where they commanded all approaches to the big barn, and patiently awaited developments.

They conversed in low tones, while they kept their bright eyes wide open for suspicious interlopers.

An hour passed away and nothing turned up.

The rain-clouds were breaking up and passing away to the westward.

"There's the moon," exclaimed Joe, pointing to a ragged patch of the blue sky where the bright luminary was struggling to show herself through the flying scud. "We'll have a clear day to-morrow, after all."

"Looks like it," replied Jack, cheerfully. "Judging by the position of the moon, I should think it was getting on to midnight. I guess Mr. Plunkett has given up his project for to-night, possibly for good. If he believes that his plan was overheard at the old shanty, you may depend on it he'll be pretty shy of putting his head into a noose."

They stuck it out another hour, and then both the boys began to feel decidedly sleepy.

The croak of the frog, and other droning noises of the night, produced a somnolent effect upon them, their heads dropped drowsily forward, and in a very short time both were sound asleep.

And, while they slept, Mr. Plunkett and his companion, Monks, fully persuaded that there had been eavesdroppers in the old shack while they were discussing their rascally plot, were beating it as fast as their legs could carry them to town.

The boys, in spite of their uncomfortable condition, slept right on through the balance of the night, until John Gray, the hired hand, coming out at daybreak, found them there, much to his amazement.

He woke them up and inquired why they had anchored themselves for the night in that spot instead of seeking their beds like all good Christians do.

"Good, gracious! Is it morning already?" ejaculated Jack, jumping to his feet in surprise. "We must have been asleep."

"I should say you had been. I found you both as sound as a bell," said Gray.

"And the barn!" almost gasped Frost, casting his eyes in the direction of the big granary.

"What about the barn?" asked the hired man, in a puzzled tone.

"Thank goodness! It is safe," cried Jack, fervently.

"Safe! You didn't think it was about to run away, did you?" said Gray, quizzically.

"We were afraid it would do worse than that," interjected Joe, solemnly.

"Oh, come now, boys. You haven't got your eyes open yet, or your wits about you."

"Haven't we? That's all you know about it," retorted Beaseley, in a nettled tone.

"The fact of the matter is, we sat down here to watch the barn, because we had good reason to fear that it would be burned down last night," explained Jack.

"Burned down!" exclaimed the hired man, in some astonishment. "Impossible!"

"Is that so?" replied Joe.

Then Jack told Gray how they had overheard Nathan Plunkett and a companion, whom he called Monks, in the shanty on the edge of the woods, where they had taken shelter from the rain on their way home, talking over their plan to destroy the granary.

"You don't mean to say that you actually heard Mr. Plunkett discussing such a criminal project?"

"That's just what I do mean to say," answered Jack, stoutly. "And I can prove it by Joe here."

"Surely you must have dreamed it all," replied Gray, incredulously, who, though he had no especial liking for the postmaster of Eden, could hardly credit the news that the storekeeper would connect himself with such a discreditable scheme.

"No, we didn't dream it all," chipped in Beaseley.

"I should stay we didn't. Whether you believe it or not, it's the fact. You don't think we'd stand guard out here on a damp night just for the fun of the thing? Nathan Plunkett is a rascal, and I'm going to let my aunt know just what sort of man he is. Come on, Joe."

Mrs. Harper was very much astonished when Jack submitted to her at the breakfast table his report of Mr. Plunkett's character and his rascally intentions toward her.

"It seems almost incredible," she said, with a pained expression.

"He seems determined to force you to marry him, and get the farm to boot, auntie."

"I wouldn't marry Mr. Plunkett if he was the last man on earth," she answered, indignantly; "even if I had any idea of ever marrying again, which I haven't. I thought I made that fact sufficiently plain to Mr. Plunkett when he proposed to me."

"Never mind, auntie," said Jack, reassuringly. "Don't let Mr. Plunkett worry you. I believe he'll keep kind of shady for a while, as I guess we gave him a good scare last night. He can't have the least idea who was in the old shanty while he and Monks were there, and that fact will keep him guessing, and make him rather shy of showing his face in this neighborhood again."

"I hope so. I never want to see his face again. When the mortgage comes due I'm going to send the money to him by you."

"All right, auntie. It would do me lots of good to see how reluctantly he will let go his hold on the farm."

Jack got his hat, left the house and made a bee-line for the anchorage of the raft.

CHAPTER IX.

THE "GOLDEN HOPE."

Frost found Beaseley already at the basin waiting for him,

"Well, I'm ready for business," he said, with a cheerful expression.

"I see you are," replied Jack, producing a rude plan of the house they were to erect on the raft. "We'll begin by measuring off the dimensions upon the deck."

They walked across the plank which connected the unwieldy-looking raft with the shore.

Jack measured off ten feet from the extreme point of the rounded stern and made a cross on the boards with a piece of red chalk.

"Bring me that piece of scantling, Joe."

Beaseley brought it.

Jack laid it down across the deck, told his companion to hold one end in position, and then drew a straight line from the starboard side of the raft to the port side, intersecting the cross.

He then measured off a foot and a half at each end and marked the spots.

"Come forward, Joe."

The performance was repeated within five feet of the point of the bow.

A line was then drawn fore and aft on either side of the deck, connecting the foot-and-a-half marks upon the cross-line.

The parallelogram thus outlined formed the exact dimensions of the proposed house.

"Now we'll lay down a new floor twelve by twenty-five feet," said Jack. "It will be raised six inches above the deck. We'll use a double layer, crossed, of those slabs for the foundation and then board it over."

That provided a couple of hours' work for them, and they proceeded to get busy without loss of time.

On account of the previous night's rain there was a good deal of moisture in the air—humidity, the scientists call it, and the boys felt the effects of it, for they were soon perspiring.

"Gee whiz!" cried Joe, wiping his forehead, "it's blamed hot this morning."

"No hotter than Saturday, old man, but we feel it more, that's all."

"It's hot for the second week in September, if you want to know."

"If we're going to put this building through in record time you don't want to let a little thing like that bother you," grinned Jack.

"I can stand it as long as you can," retorted Joe, beginning to nail down the planks like a good fellow.

There was plenty of lumber of the kind the boys wanted, and more was coming all the time down the stream which ran through the swamp.

The floor and the framework of the house was completed that day, the skeleton well secured and braced to the deck.

Next day the sides and ends were boarded up, leaving no openings whatever in the structure.

On the ensuing day the skeleton of the sloping roof, extending a foot beyond the house line, so that when boarded over it would shed the rain, if they encountered any, was put in place.

Thursday was devoted to completing the roof, in which a big hole was left, to which a cover was fitted, for receiving their cargo of grain.

Jack developed a simple but ingenious method for making the roof water-tight for a limited time—considerably longer than they expected to have any occasion to use the boat.

He applied the same process to the sides, thus furnishing a secure receptacle for the wheat in transit.

On Friday they built the deck-house, as Jack called it—a compartment five by twelve feet and eight feet high, with an opening to be shut in, if necessary, by a piece of sail-cloth.

Next morning Jack drove in to Eden, paid a flying visit to the Earles, and afterward purchased ten good-sized and stoutly hooped liquor barrels, which he brought back to the farm.

That afternoon he and Joe attached five of the barrels securely on either side of the raft by means of stout ropes, nailed into the casks to prevent them from slipping.

Before sundown the novel houseboat was completed and ready to receive her cargo, now quoted at one dollar and thirty-five cents a bushel.

Jack viewed it with pardonable pride, as the creation of his own intelligence, while Joe regarded it as the vehicle which was to provide them both with a fortnight or so of rare good fun and adventure.

"Now, let's christen it, Jack," he cried, enthusiastically.

"What shall we call it?" asked the chief constructor, thoughtfully.

"The 'Jack Frost.' How will that do?" grinned Joe.

"Go on, you're foolish," replied his friend. "We'll call it the 'Golden Hope.' That will be somewhat appropriate."

"All right, let her go at that. Three cheers for the 'Golden Hope,'" he cried, flinging his hat into the air and cheering, in which performance he was joined, but in a more dignified way, by Jack.

"On Monday we'll pole the craft around to the little wharf on the creek, and there we'll load her to the hatches, as the sailors say."

"And then we'll cut her loose from our moorings and gently glide down stream, eh?" grinned Joe, in high glee. "Bet your life when we pass Eden we'll be piped off to the queen's taste."

"I've no doubt we'll be an object of interest to the curious," laughed Jack.

"You haven't given the snap away to your aunt, yet have you?"

Jack shook his head.

"No; I wanted to surprise her with the completed boat."

"You'll surprise her all right. I hope she won't make a kick against trusting the grain aboard of her," said Joe, getting solemn all of a sudden, such an alarming possibility occurring to him now for the first time.

"Don't worry about that," replied Jack, cheerfully. "Auntie trusts me implicitly. If I say it's perfectly safe, my word will go."

"I'd have a fit if there should be any hitch at this stage

of the game," said Beaseley, so earnestly that Jack had to laugh at him.

"There's no danger of the 'Golden Hope' floating away from her anchorage between this and Monday, is there?" asked Joe, anxiously.

"Not a bit more than there was all along," answered Jack. "This stout rope holds the boat securely. Besides, she's well inside the bight, and I don't believe would move to any extent until poled out into the current of the stream."

"I'm glad to hear it. I wouldn't sleep a wink if I thought there was a chance of the craft getting adrift."

After dinner next day Jack brought his aunt down to the basin to introduce her to the odd-looking boat, the history of which he had told her on the way to church, much to her astonishment.

"And do you really think that boat is stable enough to carry our wheat all the way to St. Louis, Jack?" Mrs. Harper asked, somewhat doubtfully, as she viewed the unwieldy marine contrivance.

"As sure as you live, auntie. She'll carry every bushel with perfect safety, save you a good many dollars in freight and furnish a couple of weeks' outing on the water for Joe and I."

Jack showed her over the craft, though there wasn't much to see, and she praised her nephew's ingenuity and pluck in putting the craft together.

Later on Jack brought John Gray down to look at the "Golden Hope."

The hired man, who had had some experience in river craft of this order, examined the raft-boat with much curiosity and interest.

"Well," he said, after he had ascertained the object for which she was intended, "she's buoyant enough to carry the wheat to the Gulf, if necessary. You've got a great head to be able to build so substantial a craft out of fugitive lumber in two weeks. If you are satisfied that you and your friend Beaseley can navigate the craft between you as well as you have put it together, you ought to be able to get your wheat to St. Louis freight free all right."

"We can do that all right," replied the boy, confidently.

"It's something of a risk. I advise you to have your cargo insured before you start."

"I mean to do it, if it doesn't cost too much. I don't think there's risk enough to warrant a high premium."

"You can't tell. It's the unexpected which must be provided against, and the only way to offset that is by insurance. Then your mind will feel easier, and your aunt will be more satisfied."

And Jack fully agreed with him.

CHAPTER X.

UNDESIRABLE VISITORS.

ON Monday morning the "Golden Hope" was poled around to the wharf on the creek, two extra hands were hired and the loading of the wheat aboard of her begun.

While this work was in progress Jack and Joe rigged up a steering apparatus at the stern, which, when completed, was examined by John Gray, who declared it was strong and serviceable enough to answer the purpose required.

Stout scantlings, six feet long, were nailed at intervals along the projecting edge of the deck and braced up against the superstructure, and to these uprights a long length of clothesline was attached to form a kind of protecting railing all around the boat-raft, so the boys might pass from stern to stem, on either side, without fear of falling into the water, unless through carelessness.

The cooking apparatus, a small stove in a shallow box of sand, was next provided.

Then Jack drove to Eden and purchased the provisions for the trip and a few cooking utensils; the balance of the outfit was furnished by Mrs. Harper herself, who had begun to take a lively interest in the expedition.

The raft-boat stood the weight of her cargo in great shape, sinking gradually as ton after ton was shot into her big deck-house.

Her buoyancy was carefully investigated at intervals, and when half her load was aboard she had still two inches of displacement to her credit, according to Jack's calculations.

At last the final bushel was aboard, and so closely had the bright boy figured that practically she was loaded clear up to her hatches.

She rode the water three inches higher than Jack had expected, and that fact was a cause of much rejoicing all around.

There was now no longer any doubt but she would bear the grain safely to her port of destination, accidents or mismanagement alone excepted.

Jack made arrangements with an insurance agent to come out to the farm, view the boat and figure upon a two weeks' marine insurance.

After the agent had examined the raft-boat and taken the testimony in the case he decided the risk was too great to accept at a sum which the assured would be willing to pay, and expressed himself to that effect, much to Mrs. Harper's disappointment.

It is probable that the agent, when he returned to Eden, spread the intelligence about the "Golden Hope" about town, for quite a number of curious people drove out to the farm and asked permission to look at the craft.

Among these was the assistant editor of the Eden "Daily News," and next day the whole town knew about Jack Frost's enterprise.

The story, however, was highly complimentary of the boy's ingenuity and enterprise, and the editor took occasion also to refer to the lad's pluck and nerve as shown at the recent fire where he had saved the Earle girls from an awful death.

This publicity was rather annoying than otherwise to Jack Frost, but he had to put up with it, nevertheless.

Ever since the raft-boat had gone into commission Joe Beaseley slept on board of her.

In fact, he could hardly tear himself away from her to go to his meals.

Mr. Greene allowed him a full month's vacation, and he declared he was going to extract pleasure out of every minute of it, except, of course, when he was asleep.

The loading of the wheat was finished late Wednesday afternoon, and it was decided to sail on the following morning at sunrise.

After the sun set the wind rose somewhat, and the waters of the creek ruffled up enough to cause the raft-boat to strain slightly at her "cable."

Clouds began to pile up in the sky, and before eight o'clock the conditions looked stormy and unpropitious.

Joe ate his supper with Jack, and then both boys returned to the "Golden Hope."

Jack had purchased two lanterns—one with red glass, the other with green—which he proposed to display at night on either side of the boat, above the roof of the deck-house, after they had started upon their trip down the rivers.

In addition, he brought aboard that night an ordinary white-glass lantern used about the farm.

"Let's rig up the lanterns to-night, just for the fun of the thing," suggested Joe. "It will look kind of ship-shape, you know."

Jack fell in with the idea, and the lanterns were accordingly run up to their respective poles—the green on the starboard side, the red on the port.

"Now we look like the real thing," said Joe, with one of his cheerful grins. "Gee! It's beginning to blow some, isn't it?"

The white lantern was intended to illuminate the small deck-house.

The boys, however, did not think it necessary to light it on this occasion.

They sat together in the little cabin, as Joe called it, and talked about the trip they were to enter on the next day.

At length they grew weary, and Joe said he guessed it was time to turn in.

Jack didn't propose to roost on board when he had a comfortable room to go to, so he bade Joe good-night and started for the house, a third of a mile away.

He had gone about half the distance when he thought he heard voices.

He stopped and listened.

The wind made a good deal of noise through the trees, but at the same time it brought the sound down to him.

He was presently aware that two men were approaching him, going in the direction of the creek where the raft-boat was moored.

He didn't know of anybody that had a right to be abroad on their property at that hour of the night, so their presence interested him considerably, and he determined to lie in wait for them and, if possible, see who they were and find out what they were doing in that locality.

So he stepped back into the bushes and waited for the two men to come up.

There was no moon to aid him, and the sky was overcast and gusty-looking.

However, he knew all his neighbors so well that he believed he could identify the intruders if they came near enough to him to afford him a good look.

The voices approached closer and closer, and the tones of one had a familiar ring to the boy.

Soon the two men came out from the shadow of the trees and passed within a few feet of Jack.

There was not sufficient light for him to distinguish their features, but he knew them for all that.

They were Nathan Plunkett and the man by the name of Monks, and from the few words he picked out of their conversation Jack realized they were going down to the creek to look up the raft-boat and see if they could put it out of business.

"So that's the game you're on, Nathan Plunkett?" muttered Frost, wrathfully. "I'll see that you'll get all that's coming to you if you try to damage my boat. No doubt you fancy the craft is left to itself at night, because two-legged serpents like yourself are not common in the neighborhood. I'll just follow after you and see what didos you try to cut up. I'll have you in the rear, while Joe, who sleeps with one eye open ever since he established himself on board, will take you in the front. I'll bet we won't do a thing to you both."

Thus thought Jack as he followed the pair of rascals as fast as he dared go.

The creek was reached at last, and Frost saw Plunkett and his companion standing a few feet away from the "Golden Hope," examining her with a great deal of attention.

Finally they stepped on board, and Plunkett, drawing aside the canvas covering which partly screened the opening to the "cabin," looked into the place.

He made a motion to Monks, who came to his side and looked in also.

Jack judged they were looking at Joe, who, as he made no movement to resent the intrusion, was doubtless fast asleep.

The rascals consulted together.

They soon reached a decision, which evidently involved Beaseley, for they immediately pushed their way into the little deck-house.

"They mean to do Joe up," breathed Jack. "It's time for me to butt in."

He grabbed a stout stick which lay close to him on the ground and dashed on board the raft-boat.

There was a struggle going on in the "cabin."

Jack could hear some pretty strong language being used by the postmaster and Monks, but Joe didn't seem to be uttering a sound.

"I'm afraid they're getting the best of him," thought Frost, as he reached the deck-house entrance. "I wish there was a light burning, so I could see how things look inside."

Evidently somebody else had the same desire to throw a light on the situation, for at that very moment a match

was ignited, and by its glare Jack saw that it was Plunkett who had lit a lucifer and held it in his fingers, and he also made out that the two men had Beaseley face down on the deck, the storekeeper kneeling on his back, while Monks, who was a smoothly shaven, youngish-looking man, had one of his hands over the boy's mouth.

As the match expired in the storekeeper's fingers Jack dashed in and struck him a stunning blow on the head with his cudgel.

Plunkett fell half-dazed against the bunk out of which they had pulled Joe.

Jack followed up his advantage by rapping Monks in a similar manner, though the blow was not so effectual, owing to the darkness.

The fellow, however, was obliged to release his grip on Beaseley.

Joe, finding he was no longer held at a serious disadvantage, struggled to his feet, encouraged by Jack's voice, and the two boys attacked the intruders in right down earnest.

CHAPTER XI.

OFF AT LAST.

THE scrimmage which ensued in the gloom of the contracted deck-house was sharp, short and decisive.

Monks soon had all he wanted of it.

Managing to extricate himself, he fled to the shore as fast as his legs could carry him and disappeared in the direction he and his companion had come.

It was different with Plunkett.

Jack's blow had put him out of business, and he became an easy victim.

Frost struck a match and flashed the light in the postmaster's eyes.

"Well, Mr. Plunkett," he said, coolly, "what have you to say for yourself?"

The storekeeper evidently had nothing to say for himself, for he only scowled back at Jack and remained silent.

While Joe blocked Plunkett's retreat by the doorway, Jack took down the lantern and lighted it.

This cast a welcome illumination on the situation.

"Joe and I would be glad to know why you have honored us with your presence at this late hour of the night," said Jack, sarcastically.

"Let me pass, you young rascals," demanded Mr. Plunkett, aggressively.

"Certainly," replied Frost, with mock politeness, "after you have explained why you and your friend Monks boarded this raft and attacked my friend Joe Beaseley."

The postmaster flashed him an evil look.

"You young villain!" he exclaimed, vindictively. "You struck me with that stick you have in your hand. I'll have you in jail for assault the first thing in the morning."

"All right," replied the boy, cheerfully. "Do so, if you think it will pay you. But I guess we'll have something to say about your designs on this cargo of wheat which will make you look like thirty cents, and maybe land you in a cell."

"How dare you talk that way to me?" sputtered Mr. Plunkett.

"You can't work any bluffs on me, Mr. Plunkett," said Jack, sternly. "We've caught you in a mighty small piece of business, and we also know what brought you and Monks around here a week ago Sunday night. Somebody heard all that passed between you and your companion that night in the old shanty, and you were both recognized. I have evidence enough to cause the arrest of both of you, and I guess I could make it pretty hot for you if I chose to do so. If you know when you're well off you'll keep away for good from this farm. When your mortgage falls due it will be paid in full; after that we don't want anything to do with you. Let him go, Joe."

Both boys stepped aside so the postmaster of Eden could pass out of the deck-house.

He never uttered a word as he took advantage of his opportunity.

He was cornered and beaten to a standstill, and he knew it.

But for all that he was just as dangerous as ever, and a desire for revenge rankled deep down in his heart.

He stepped ashore in sulky defiance, and the last the boys saw of him was when his tall form vanished into the gloom of the night.

"I guess we'd better stand watch by turns to-night," said Jack. "I can't afford to take any chances with a pair of rascals like those two around loose in this neighborhood. They are capable of doing a heap of mischief in their present humor if they get the ghost of a chance."

Joe thought so, too, so for the rest of the night the boys in turn stood guard two hours at a stretch, until the morning sun brought the hired man down to tell them that an early breakfast awaited them at the farmhouse.

Leaving Gray to watch the raft-boat, the boys went to the house, where they found Mrs. Harper waiting for them.

After the meal she accompanied them to the wharf to see the boat off on its voyage which was to carry it down the "Father of Waters" to the city of St. Louis.

The boys stepped aboard the raft-boat, and each took up a long pole as John Gray released the ropes which held the bow and stern of the craft to the wharf.

As she began to move forward of her own accord Jack took his place at the helm, and then both boys shouted farewell to Mrs. Harper and John Gray on the shore, waving their hats gleefully.

Jack's aunt and the hired man waved their hands in return, and now the river voyage had actually begun.

"Down the river, down the river, down the O-hi-o!" howled Joe, feeling a strong desire to stand on his head through sheer happiness.

"You mean 'Down the creek, down the creek, down to the Chippewa,' don't you, Joe?" laughed Jack.

"Sure I do. I mean any old thing that fits into the situation. Ain't there anything for me to do? Must I stand around with my hands in my pockets till my turn comes to steer?"

"I guess you can find something to do. You want to coil up those ropes John tossed aboard and make things ship-shape."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n Frost," grinned Joe, and he started to obey orders at once.

Jack was prepared to find that the raft-boat would display a strong tendency to whirl around in the current of the creek, which was fairly rapid, and was now carrying them down toward Eden and the junction of the Chippewa at a satisfactory speed.

Although the young navigator had yet to learn even the art of managing a craft, he soon found that the difficulty of keeping the craft head-on could readily be overcome by practice.

A kind of "crow's nest" had been built on top of the small deck-house, where the boys would have to take up their post, turn about, in order to keep a lookout ahead.

Joe was the first, of course, to mount to the "roost," as he called it.

He couldn't get lonesome, for he was within easy talking distance of Jack.

It was a nice airy spot, and afforded an excellent view of the surrounding landscape.

There was small danger of the raft meeting with any other craft, unless it might be a rowboat, on the creek.

The stream was fairly broad and deep all the way to its junction with the Chippewa, five miles away.

"This is simply great, Jack," cried Joe. "We're going down faster than I thought we would."

"How do you like it up there?"

"Fine. I can see a mile straight ahead, and there isn't a thing in the way."

"The creek runs nearly straight the entire way to Eden," replied Frost.

"I know it does. I went down once about a year ago on a sailboat."

It was nearly seven o'clock when they approached the steeples of Eden.

As they floated past the town they became an object of interest and curiosity to a good many people, especially the boys of the neighborhood, who began to flock to the shore in considerable numbers as the news of the approach of the house-raft spread.

"Gee whiz!" grinned Joe. "Those kids act as if they'd never seen anything like this before in their lives."

"I don't believe they ever have," laughed Jack.

"Hi, hi, hi!" came out hails from the water-front of Eden from the youngsters, who were following the course of the raft as they might a street procession.

"There are some girls waving their hands and handkerchiefs at us," said Joe, standing up and saluting the fair ones with his broad-brimmed hat.

"I see them," answered Frost, taking off his hat and bowing to the young ladies.

"I tell you, this is all to the mustard," said Beaseley, tickled to death over the sensation their appearance created.

"Come now, Joe," warned Jack. "You don't want to forget to attend to business. We're sliding into the Chippewa, and we may run foul of something if you don't keep your weather eye lifting."

"Nothing in the way, old man. We'll be in the river in a minute."

Jack knew that from the swing of the raft.

In spite of all he could do, the raft was getting around broad-on to the current where it emptied into the Chippewa.

"Come down and lend a hand, will you, Joe?" he asked his assistant.

"Sure I will," replied Beaseley, cheerfully.

He quickly descended from his perch and gave Frost the benefit of his powerful muscles.

Together they managed to prevent the raft from turning completely around, as she surely otherwise would have done.

In a few minutes the "Golden Hope" was fairly launched into the middle of the more rapidly flowing Chippewa, and the raft floated along at a faster rate.

"It's seven o'clock," said Jack. "You may take a spell at the steering gear. You want to see that you keep her head pointed straight down the river. I'll keep you posted. You won't find the job very easy till you get some experience."

He relinquished the rudder pole to his companion and mounted himself to the lookout.

Joe's first efforts were somewhat discouraging.

"What's the matter with the blamed old raft, anyway? I can feel it trying to swing the wrong way every minute," grumbled Beaseley.

Jack laughed, and then handed him down some advice based on the experience he had accumulated during the trip down the creek.

"I guess it's harder down here on the Chippewa," mumbled Beaseley.

At that moment Jack saw a rowboat, with a couple of girls and a boy on board, put out from one of the small wharves and make directly for the raft-boat.

CHAPTER XII.

MISS VIRGINIA EARLE VISITS THE "GOLDEN HOPE."

"I WONDER who they are?" thought Frost. "They are rowing directly for us."

As the rowboat came nearer, and the faces of the girls became plainer, Jack uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

He recognized Virginia Earle and her sister Jessie.

"Hello, Joe!" he cried.

"Hello yourself," replied the stout boy, whose attention was fully occupied with his efforts to keep the raft straight.

"We're going to have visitors."

"Visitors!" ejaculated Beaseley, in surprise, letting go of the rudder-pole and rushing to the starboard side of the craft.

"Here, here!" shouted Jack. "Get back to your post, Joe, or we'll be stern-on in a moment."

He jumped down to help his companion regain control of the unwieldy boat.

When this had been accomplished, he warned Beaseley against deserting the steering-gear again, and then walked over to the side to welcome the Earle girls.

"Good morning, Miss Earle," he said, politely lifting his hat.

"Good morning, Mr. Frost. We've come out to see the 'Golden Hope,'" she laughed.

"Joe and myself appreciate the honor you have conferred upon us by getting up so early to see us off."

"Do you?"

"Sure we do," chipped in Beaseley, as the boat came close up to the raft's stern quarter.

"May we come aboard, Mr. Frost?" asked Virginia.

"Of course you may, and stay as long as you choose."

"Oh, we can only stay a few minutes. We don't want to be carried too far down the river, you know."

Jack assisted the two girls to the deck, after he had made the boat fast alongside by her painter, and the boy who had rowed them out stepped on board without any help.

"This is my cousin, Tom Waldron," said Virginia, introducing their companion.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Tom. Let me make you known to my crew, Joe Beaseley."

The two boys shook hands.

"You're going all the way to St. Louis, aren't you?" said Waldron.

"That's what we are," replied Jack.

"I wish I were going along with you," he answered, wistfully.

"I wish you were, too," replied Frost, cheerfully.

"I wouldn't mind taking such a trip myself," smiled Virginia. "I suppose you expect to have a fine time?"

"We're going to have barrels of fun," grinned Beaseley.

"Boys do have such an advantage over us girls."

"You see now you made a mistake by being born a girl," chuckled Joe.

"I'm afraid I didn't have any say in the matter," replied Virginia, roguishly.

"I'm glad I ain't a girl all right."

"Would you like to climb up to the crow's nest, Miss Earle?" asked Jack, pointing to the lookout platform. "I'll help you up. You'll get a splendid view from there."

"Oh, my, is that what you call that place?"

"Yes. That's where we keep our lookout ahead."

"I don't know if I can get up there or not," she replied, doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, you can. Just give me your hand. It's only a short ladder, you see."

Thus encouraged, she permitted the young navigator to help her up.

"Isn't it grand!" she exclaimed, looking up and down and across the river. "I should just love to stay here all morning. It's almost as nice as being on a steamboat. So you and Joe Beaseley actually built this boat between you," she added, looking at him admiringly. "Aren't you too smart for anything?"

"Now, Miss Earle——" protested Jack, though secretly delighted at her commendation.

"I mean it," she insisted. "My father says you're the smartest and bravest boy in Eden County, and I fully agree with him. I should be a most ungrateful girl if I didn't" she added, earnestly, and with a look into the boy's eyes which sent his blood leaping through his veins at a great rate; "for you saved my life in the most heroic manner, as well as the life of my dear sister."

"I can't deny that," stammered Jack, finding that words came very slow to him under the bewitching influence of her presence. "All I can say is—what I think I have said two or three times before—that I am glad I was able to help you when you needed help. I would do the same thing again for you if that were necessary."

"Thank you," she replied, casting down her eyes. "I believe you."

"I hope you will go out and call on my aunt while I am away. She thinks you the nicest——"

"Now you are getting complimentary," Virginia laughed.

"Oh, no," protested Jack. "It's the truth, because I think so, too," he added, desperately.

She blushed up to her eyes and looked away.

"You will promise me that you will call at the farm, won't you?" he insisted, capturing one of her hands.

"Yes, since you wish it," she answered, in a low tone.

"Thank you."

"How long do you expect to be away?" she asked, presently.

"I can't say exactly. Probably two weeks or more."

"Well, I shall expect to see you just as soon as you get back. I shall want to hear all about your trip."

"I will not fail to call," replied the boy.

"I should be very much disappointed if you delayed your visit too long."

"I wouldn't disappoint you for the world."

"Then I shall look to see you a day or two after you get back, remember," she said, archly. "Now, please help me down. We really must go ashore right away. We haven't had our breakfast yet, and I know Tom will object to a long pull on an empty stomach."

Jack assisted her to the deck with as much care as though she were a princess of royal blood.

"Come, Jessie, Tom, it's time we put out for the shore. We must be all of a half a mile below Eden."

They embarked, Jack doing the honors.

"Good-bye, boys," cried Virginia, as her cousin, Tom

Waldron, shoved the rowboat clear. "I hope you'll have a splendid time."

"Thanks, Miss Earle," replied Jack.

"Good-bye, fellows. I'm dead sorry I'm not with you," floated back from Waldron, as he headed the boat to the shore and bent to his oars in a sturdy fashion.

Jack mounted once more to the lookout and noted that the river was clear as far ahead as he could see.

At eight o'clock the boys changed places again, the arrangement being one-hour spells for each alternately at the helm.

At twelve o'clock, when Jack took his turn at steering, Joe started in to cook a pot of coffee.

An inverted box served them for a table, on which some meat sandwiches, a whole pie and other "fixings" were spread out.

"Grub is ready," announced Joe in twenty minutes.

He squatted down on the deck, while Jack took his meal standing, as it was out of the question to leave the helm to itself for any length of time.

"This isn't so bad," said Beaseley, cheerfully. "These sandwiches beat anything I've tasted in a dog's age."

"They're all to the good, old man. Aunt Lucy has the knack of making the boss sandwiches on record. And her pies makes one's mouth water just to look at them."

"You bet they do," acquiesced his companion. "This is a peach pie, I guess. If there's one pie I like better than another it is peach."

"I thought mince was your favorite?" grinned Jack.

"That's right. I forgot. Mince always goes to the right spot."

"How about pumpkin? I heard you say once that pumpkin pies were first favorites with you."

"Oh, come now, don't make me think of all the delicacies that I like. Almost all kinds of pie look alike to me when I come to eat them."

"You'd make a good pie-rate, wouldn't you?" laughed Jack.

"Sure pop. We ought to have brought a black flag with a skull and cross-bones painted on it to hoist at our mast-head."

"What do you call our masthead?"

"One of those uprights on which we're going to display our colored lights when it grows dark."

Joe cleared away and washed the dishes, and then hied himself up to the crow's nest, from which perch he chinned with Jack until his companion called him down to steer for an hour.

"I guess I've got the hang of the thing now," said Beaseley. "By the time we reach the Mississippi I'll be able to steer with my eyes shut."

They passed one river steamboat about three o'clock, but she was only a small affair, a freighter.

Altogether the river seemed to be singularly clear of boats or vessels of any description.

The sun set about six, and shortly afterward Joe piped to supper.

At seven the colored lights were hoisted into place, and

the white light was hung in the lookout station, exactly between the other lanterns.

Darkness gradually settled down deep and solemn over the face of the landscape and river.

There were many lights on either shore to guide them on their way.

"We must be careful to keep to the middle of the stream, as near as we can guess," said Jack, "or the first thing we know we may find ourselves ashore. If the tide happened to be high at the time we'd be in a pretty fix, unless we succeeded in poling ourselves clear right away."

"Get your banjo, Jack, and let's have some music," said Joe.

So Frost got his instrument out of the deck-house, tuned up, and presently the strains of a lively dance were floating on the still evening air.

Then he sang several popular songs, Joe joining in on the chorus.

"Better turn in now, Joe," said Jack, as he relieved his companion at the rudder. "We commence our four-hour watches now. I'll wake you at midnight. Then you are to call me at four."

"I don't feel a bit sleepy. Guess I'll stay awake a while longer."

"You can do as you please, but it's your funeral, you know."

At half-past eight Beaseley took possession of the one bunk and in five minutes was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE MIGHTY MISSISSIPPI.

JACK FROST was now thoroughly skilled in steering the raft-boat, and consequently found the work merely mechanical.

After Joe went to sleep Jack found time hung rather slow on his hands.

There wasn't a light anywhere on the river, which lay black and silent before him under a moonless sky.

The sky, however, was lustrous with stars, with only a few fleecy clouds in sight.

As the hours advanced the lights along the dark outlines of the shores grew fewer and farther apart, but there was light enough for Jack to keep his course in the middle of the Chippewa, which, if not near so wide as the mighty Mississippi they were approaching, was still broad enough for every purpose of navigation.

There is very little excitement in steering a clumsy craft like the "Golden Hope" all alone in the still hours of the night.

Jack felt, too, that a heavy responsibility rested on him in conveying two thousand bushels of wheat, worth one dollar and forty cents a bushel at that moment, so many hun-

dreds of miles by water to the big, bustling city of St. Louis.

It was the event of his young life.

If anything went wrong, through his carelessness or that of his companion, for whose faithfulness he held himself responsible to his aunt, and a part or the whole of the cargo should thereby be damaged or lost, he felt he would never forgive himself.

Every little while he would go to the rope rail and glance ahead to make sure he was where he ought to be, and that there was no obstruction of any kind ahead.

At midnight he woke Joe up.

"You'll find it pretty tedious work steering all by yourself, Joe," he said. "Four hours will drag themselves in an endless way, but you must knuckle right down to business and never forget for a moment that you have a valuable cargo depending on your watchfulness. If anything should happen to this wheat my aunt would lose her farm, and that would be too much satisfaction to hand out to that rascal Plunkett. Keep that fact before you, and do the very best that is in you."

"Bet your boots I will," answered Beaseley. "I won't fail you, old chap."

And he didn't.

He found considerable to interest him even in the gloom and solitude of that first night, or early morning, on the river, and he stuck faithfully to his work, like a sentry on duty in war-time, and called Jack promptly at four o'clock.

At sunrise Jack saw a big tug pulling a huge flat-boat loaded with grain coming down astern.

It was more than an hour before this outfit came abreast and passed the "Golden Hope."

No one on board seemed to take particular notice of the raft-boat.

Every kind of craft is seen on the great western rivers, and none is so strange as to excite a sensation in the mind of the beholder.

They met many different kinds of boats that day, and passed two steamboats going up the river.

Towns of various sizes loomed up at intervals on both sides of the stream.

In fact, as they approached the junction with the Mississippi they encountered life and traffic in increasing quantity.

"How soon do we strike the big river?" asked Joe, when they were eating supper.

"Give it up, but I should not be surprised if we entered it before dark."

"I hope we do. I'm anxious to see what it looks like."

"You'll have lots of opportunity for that during the next week."

They did not reach America's largest river until some hours after dark.

In fact, they had been on it a full half hour before Jack awoke to the fact and called Joe's attention to it.

The river was high, the current much stronger than it had been on the Chippewa, and the progress of the "Golden Hope" was correspondingly increased.

At ten o'clock a big steamer passed them a short distance away, and the swell she left behind her caused the raft-boat to roll a bit for a few moments; but she was too solid and heavily laden to be greatly affected.

And so the wheat-boat went on down the mighty river.

One day was very like the next day, and all days were very much alike.

Sunday morning they drew near a big Iowa town, and, as the weather looked threatening, Jack decided to put in and moor his craft to a small vacant wharf he spied ahead.

"I'll be glad to stretch my legs on dry land for an hour or so," said Joe. "Just for a change, you know."

"Well, we need a few supplies for our larder," said Jack. "I'll appoint you commissary agent. But whether you'll be able to buy anything to-day or not must depend on chance. If you don't find any stores open, go to the hotel and see what you can skirmish up, and we'll haul in somewhere else to-morrow."

The boys, as they approached the town, found that it was an easier matter to go ahead than it was to stop, for the raft-boat had got into the habit of doing so.

The water was too deep to permit the use of poles, and so the "Golden Hope" was helplessly carried past the town.

It began to rain a little, too, and this made matters uncomfortable for the helmsman, though Jack had provided a rain-coat for such an emergency.

Under these disagreeable circumstances, and because both boys were vexed because they failed to run in shore close enough to bring the raft-boat to a wharf, the morning passed away disagreeably enough.

"It isn't all fun, after all," grumbled Joe, as he peered out from the shelter of the deck-house onto the misty-looking river and the somber shores, that looked particularly uninviting in their damp unpicturesqueness.

Dinner was a failure that day, and scarce in quantity as well as quality, for, to Beaseley's disgust, the supply of pie was wholly exhausted, and dinner without pie was to him like a desert without an oasis.

Along in the afternoon, when the sky promised a still heavier downpour, the young voyagers discovered another good-sized town ahead on the Iowa shore.

Jack decided to make an extraordinary effort to land here, if the thing was possible of accomplishment.

He made his calculations in better season than before, and succeeded in steering the raft-boat into the shallow water, where they could use their poles.

They struck the shore some little distance above the town; but Joe declared a walk of half a mile or more was just to his taste after his long confinement to the boat.

But he found that the walk would have to be put off for a while, for hardly had they succeeded in mooring the craft securely when the heavens seemed to open, as it were, and a perfect deluge of rain descended, which drove them both under cover and kept them there for an hour.

Then the weather cleared somewhat, and Beaseley, putting on the raincoat to protect himself against another possible shower, stepped ashore and started for town.

He was gone an hour and a half; in fact, it was growing

dark fast, and Jack was preparing the lamps for hoisting when he returned with his arms full of various kinds of provender, including several pies.

They built a fire in the stove and enjoyed a corking supper—the best in several days.

"We might as well stop here all night," said Jack. "It will be safer, and we can get a full night's rest apiece. I'll sleep on the floor, as we have only one bunk."

"Pooh! Let me take the floor. You're the skipper, and are entitled to whatever luxury there is."

They had some little argument over the matter, and finally Jack agreed to take the bunk.

"Did you write and mail that letter to my aunt, as I asked you to?" he inquired.

"Sure thing. You don't suppose I'd forget that, do you?"

"No, I didn't suppose you would."

"Say, old fellow, I've got a great idea. It's a wonder you didn't think about it," grinned Joe, who seemed full of some newly discovered scheme.

"Well, what is it, Joe? Is it anything that will help us?"

"Sure it will."

"Let's have it, then."

"What's the matter with our rigging up a sail?"

"A sail! Oh, come off, Joe, we couldn't use a sail very well on this craft. If such a thing had been feasible I should have borrowed one at Eden and fixed her up."

"Is that so?" asked Beaseley, clearly disappointed. "I thought we could rig it between those two uprights we hang our lanterns to, and it would help us along a bit when the breezes came up."

"Those uprights aren't strong enough for such a thing."

"We could make them stronger, couldn't we?"

"We might brace them, it is true. However, we haven't the sail to experiment with."

"I know where I could get an old patched one for half a dollar," said Joe, eagerly.

"You seem to have been looking into the matter," smiled Jack.

"No. The idea struck me as I came along the shore on my way back. I saw the sail hanging outside a boat-house about a quarter of a mile below here. I asked a man standing at the door if he wanted to sell it, and he said he did, and that I could have it for fifty cents, as he had no use for it."

"Well, that's cheap enough. I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll pole down to the place in the morning, buy the sail and see if we can get some rope to brace the uprights with. If I think the poles will stand the strain we'll give your plan a trial."

Joe was sure the scheme would work, but Jack was not so confident.

After they turned in the young skipper thought the matter over, and figured out how he believed it might be made to work, but before he finally arrived at a satisfactory conclusion he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF THE TRIP.

AFTER breakfast they unmoored and worked the "Golden Hope" down to the boat-house.

The boys went ashore and found the man Joe had spoken to the previous afternoon.

Jack had a talk with him, told him how he thought the sail he wanted to sell might be made available, and the man went aboard the raft-boat and, after examining the supports, gave them the benefit of some valuable suggestions.

He had some pulley-blocks and a quantity of stout line he was willing to sell them, so Jack made a bargain with him, and under his directions they went to work to carry out Joe's idea in an effective manner.

They braced the uprights in a satisfactory way, and to the top of each attached a pulley-block and rove a line through them.

The man furnished a thin pole as a yard for the sail, and to each end of this pole they secured the small clothes-line pulleys which they had previously used at the peaks of the uprights to hoist the lanterns with.

The line was put through these pulleys, and thus, by pulling simultaneously on the line on each side of the boat, the sail could be raised about five feet above the sloping roof of the grain-house.

A piece of line was fastened to each of the lower corners of the sail, by which it was secured to each of the uprights.

As the sail could only be spread in one position, they could not hope to obtain the best results; but when the wind blew with a favorable slant Jack judged it was bound to accelerate their speed down the big river.

And so it proved.

That afternoon the wind came pretty fresh from the northwest.

The boys hoisted the sail, and both were delighted with the satisfactory outcome of the experiment.

"We must be making all of five miles an hour now," said Jack, at length.

"Bet your boots we are," chuckled Joe. "I ain't such a lunkhead, after all, I guess."

"I take my hat off to you, Beaseley," replied the young skipper, with a mock salute. "You're all to the good, old man."

"Sure I am. I'm the real persimmon, and don't you make any mistake about it. We're going to cut our trip down a couple of days."

"I guess we will, if the wind blows fair for us."

With the sail drawing well, they found that the labor of steering was reduced more than one-half.

The raft-boat showed no tendency to whirl around, and it was really a pleasure to steer her, so Beaseley declared.

Neither were they obliged to follow the current in its broad sweeps around the bends of the river, and they saved many miles by taking short cuts.

They gained still another advantage.

The raft-boat was under better control when the sail was in operation, and, instead of being entirely at the mercy of the current, they could go where they chose.

This enabled Jack to make frequent stops to provision up when there was any wind, and it came from the right direction, for he could make a landing when and where he pleased, and with little difficulty.

Now, with a good wind, they covered about a hundred miles in twenty-four hours, while when they had to depend upon the current they made but sixty.

About seven on the morning of the eighth day they reached Hannibal, Missouri.

As soon as Jack found out the name of the big place on the western shore of the river he was in high glee.

"We have made much better time than I expected we would," he remarked to Joe. "Why, if we have the wind with us we ought to reach St. Louis to-morrow afternoon."

"You don't mean it," cried Beaseley, much astonished. "Why, I thought we were good for a week yet."

"No, sir. We're just about one hundred and fifty miles from our destination by water."

"Glory! Who'd have thought it?"

"Aren't you glad, Joe?"

"I don't know. I've had a fine time sailing down. I wouldn't care if we were going back the same way."

"That's out of the question."

"I suppose it is. But, to tell you the truth, I'm sorry to have to leave the old craft so soon. It took a lot of hard work to build her, and we don't know if we can sell her for anything more than firewood."

"Oh, you can't tell. I'll bet there are a good many people who would be glad to buy so substantial a craft if they could get her as cheap as we're willing to sell her. The trouble is to reach those people."

"You might advertise her."

"I'll consider the matter. Now, Joe, I'm going to put in here for a short time at one of the wharves. I want to find out the price of wheat. Two days ago it was one dollar and forty-eight cents per bushel. It ought to be one dollar and fifty cents now."

"Your aunt is going to make a good thing out of her grain this year."

"Well, she needs to. You know, two thousand cold dollars of it goes to Mr. Plunkett inside of two weeks."

With the assistance of the sail they worked the "Golden Hope" into a vacant wharf, made fast, and Jack went ashore.

He bought some stationery, wrote and mailed a letter to his aunt, telling her they and the wheat were all right up

to that point, and that they were within a day and a half's journey of St. Louis.

He purchased the chief daily of Hannibal and found that wheat had risen to one dollar and fifty-four cents.

They had finished dinner next day, and Joe was washing up the dishes, when they reached the mouth of the Missouri River.

Jack was first to notice that the river was widening out to a great extent.

The further they went on the further they seemed to get from either shore.

In a very short time they appeared to have the center of a great inland sea.

"Gee whizz!" exclaimed Joe, after he had finished his work and had time to look about him at the changed surroundings. "Where have we got to? We must have passed St. Louis in the night and are heading out into the Gulf of Mexico."

"Go on, child," replied Jack, laughing. "What you see now is the mouth of the Missouri River. We're only a few miles above the city of St. Louis. We'll be hauled up alongside the levee before dark."

Joe gazed open-mouthed around.

They had grown accustomed to meet and pass lots of craft of all kinds of late, but the number they were now in the midst of cast the previous day's experiences altogether in the shade.

Great steamboats raced madly past the raft-boat, beside which the "Golden Hope" looked like a mere cork.

Huge flat-boats floated lazily down the river, and the scene became more lively and exciting as they advanced.

At last the metropolis of Missouri opened out before their eyes—their port of destination, with its dense mass of houses, its busy levee, its towering elevators, in which millions of bushels of grain were stored at that moment, and its crowd of steamboats and other craft lined along the water-front.

It was a wonderful scene to Joe Beaseley, who was not used to city life, as was Jack Frost.

"Great Moses!" he exclaimed. "This beats anything I ever saw."

At five o'clock they obtained a place to moor the boat temporarily, and then they went to a nearby restaurant and had supper.

They were both satisfied and happy, for they had successfully accomplished a somewhat remarkable feat—floating a large quantity of wheat in a home-made craft from Eden County, Wisconsin, to St. Louis, Mo., in nine days and a half.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

JACK made inquiries early next morning about where he should find commission grain merchants, and was referred to the street where a great many of these merchants had their places of business.

When he and Joe were on their way to the restaurant at which they proposed to breakfast he bought a couple of morning dailies from a newsboy.

After giving their order at the table the first thing both the boys did was to look up the price of wheat.

It was quoted at one dollar and sixty cents per bushel.

It didn't take much figuring to show that their load would fetch something over three thousand two hundred dollars, less commission.

"Hadn't we better hold on a few days, Jack? It might rise to one dollar and seventy-five cents, or even two dollars."

"No, Joe. The present price is good enough for me. Aunt Lucy will clear three thousand over all expenses. That's a thousand dollars more than she expected to get."

"All right, Jack. It's your wheat."

"Suppose it was yours?"

"I'd wait two days more, at any rate."

"I'm not taking any chances, Joe, now that I have arrived on the ground. Something might happen to our cargo if I waited."

"Why, what could happen to it now? We're moored to the levee, as they call it, aren't we?"

"Oh, I don't mean to say that I think anything would happen to it, but, you know, the unexpected is always liable to happen."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before he suddenly clutched his companion's arm and looked over his shoulder toward the front of the restaurant.

"What's the matter?" asked Joe, a bit startled at his manner.

"The unexpected has happened, Joe," he whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't look around when I tell you."

"All right," replied Beaseley, beginning to get excited.

"Mr. Plunkett and his friend Monks have just come into the restaurant and have taken the first table."

"Gee whiz! Is that really the fact?"

"It is."

"What the deuce are they doing in St. Louis?"

"I'm afraid they've come here to try and do us up on the wheat."

"Ho! How can they?"

"Now you've got me. We must wait till they've gone, then you must hurry back to the raft and stand watch over it while I rush off and fetch a commission man down to make the sale."

They ate the meal slowly, Jack keeping a sharp eye on the first table, where his enemy and Monks were apparently enjoying their breakfast.

At length the two men rose, went to the counter, settled for the meal and walked out on the street.

"Keep your eye on them, Joe, while I pay these checks."

In half a minute he rejoined his companion outside.

"Which way did they go?" he asked.

"Toward the levee," answered Joe.

"They are on the lookout for the 'Golden Hope,' as sure as you're alive. Now, hustle off with you, and don't let them see you. If they spot our craft, don't let them on board, if you have to slug both of them to prevent it."

"All right, Jack. I'll knock the daylights out of them if they monkey with me."

They parted at once, and Jack took his way to the district where the commission merchants had their stores.

The boy selected one place at random, entered the store and asked to see the head of the house.

He was directed to step into the private office.

He did so, and lost not a moment in stating his business.

"I have two thousand bushels of wheat alongside the levee at the foot of Blank Street. Do you want to buy it at the prevailing market rate?" the boy said to the merchant.

"Whom do you represent, Mr. Frost?"

"My aunt, Mrs. Harper, of Eden County, Wisconsin."

"Have you brought the wheat all the way from that State?"

"Yes, sir; by water."

"The wheat is in bulk, of course?"

"Yes, sir. All ready to go to the elevator."

"I will give you one dollar and sixty cents per bushel for it."

"It's yours, sir," said Jack, promptly.

"I'll send a representative with you to examine the grain and, if it is in first-class condition, to close the deal."

"All right, sir."

In five minutes a bright young man was summoned and introduced to Jack.

The merchant gave him his orders, and the young man started for the levee with Jack.

When they reached the foot of Blank Street they found a crowd gathered about a certain part of the levee, just at the point where Jack knew the "Golden Hope" was tied up.

They pushed their way to the front, to find Mr. Plunkett and Monks trying to effect a lodgment on the wheat-boat, while Joe Beaseley was standing them off with the short pole which had done service as a yard for their sail.

Jack rushed to his friend's aid, and in the struggle which ensued Mr. Plunkett was tumbled into the river, from which he was rescued, a melancholy looking object, by a longshoreman.

He and Monks retired from the scene much crestfallen and swearing to take vengeance on the spunky boy.

Jack explained the cause of the scrimmage to the astonished representative of the commission house, who declared the rascals ought to be arrested.

He then examined the wheat, found it came up to all requirements, and the deal was closed.

Arrangements were at once made with the captain of a tug close by to tow the "Golden Hope" to Elevator D, belonging to a certain big firm, and the young man and the two boys went along.

After the grain had been absorbed and automatically measured by the elevator the boat was towed back to her former moorings and Jack went back to the store to get the money.

The merchant kindly permitted his young man to accompany Jack to the bank and procure for him a draft on the Eden National Bank for the three thousand odd dollars the wheat came to.

When he returned to the boat he found Joe talking to a stranger.

This man wanted to charter the raft-boat to take a load of lime down to a small town at the junction of the Ohio River, and after some conversation Jack offered to deliver the stuff for a certain sum, which was accepted.

"You'll have to cut a door in your deck-house in order to get your load aboard," said the man.

"I'll have that arranged by the time you get your lime here."

"I'll have it here inside of two hours."

It took the "Golden Hope" two days to deliver the lime at its destination.

Then, while Jack was wondering what he was going to do with his craft, he received a satisfactory offer for her and accepted it.

That night he and Joe started by express for Eden, Wisconsin, where they arrived in due time, and hustled out at once for the farm.

Jack was received with open arms by his aunt, who complimented him highly on the success of his trip with the wheat to St. Louis.

The draft for three thousand dollars odd was deposited

to her credit in the Eden National Bank, while Jack and Joe made a deposit on their own accounts of their individual shares of the profits of the lime cargo from St. Louis to the Ohio River, as well as the amount realized from the sale of the boat-raft.

Mrs. Harper insisted on presenting Jack with two hundred and fifty dollars as a substantial recognition, in addition to his wages, of the interest he displayed in the welfare of the farm.

Jack did not fail to call on Virginia Earle right away after his return, as he had promised to do, and was most graciously received not only by the young lady herself, but by her family as well.

He stayed to tea, of course, and after the meal Mr. Earle presented the boy, in behalf of himself and Mrs. Earle, with an elegant gold watch, and chain to match, in testimony of their gratitude to him for saving the lives of their two daughters.

In due time Jack Frost personally took up the mortgage on his aunt's farm and forever relieved her of any further connection with Mr. Nathan Plunkett.

Under Jack's management the farm continued to produce successful crops and increase in value as agricultural property.

When he reached his eighteenth year his aunt presented him with a half interest in the farm, assuring him that it would all be his at her death.

At twenty-one Jack attended his own wedding in the town of Eden, and the bride was Virginia Earle, just as everybody who had watched the course of events since young Frost returned from his trip to St. Louis in the "Golden Hope" said it would be.

To-day Jack Frost is one of the most prosperous farmers of Western Wisconsin.

And why should not he be so?

He possesses the grit, energy and ambition that pave THE WAY TO SUCCESS.

THE END.

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